The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

The tall building artistically reconsidered *by Ada Louise Huxtable*, 1

'The Free Love Corner' *by Martin Seymour-Smith*, 26

Signs of passion *by Hilton Kramer*, 40

William Gerhardie *by Hortense Calisher*, 46

Art: The Avery retrospective by *Sanford Schwartz*, 55; **Music:** Opera appreciation, Metropolitan-style *by Samuel Lipman*, 63; **Architecture:** Neutra and the International Style *by William H. Jordy*, 69

Books: *Patrick Mc Carthy* Camus *reviewed by Norman Podhoretz*, 74; *Susan Sontag* A Susan Sontag Reader *reviewed by Michael Vannoy Adams*, 83; *Bernard Malamud* God's Grace *reviewed by Arthur Krystal*, 87; **Notebook:** Glenn Gould (1932-1982), 91

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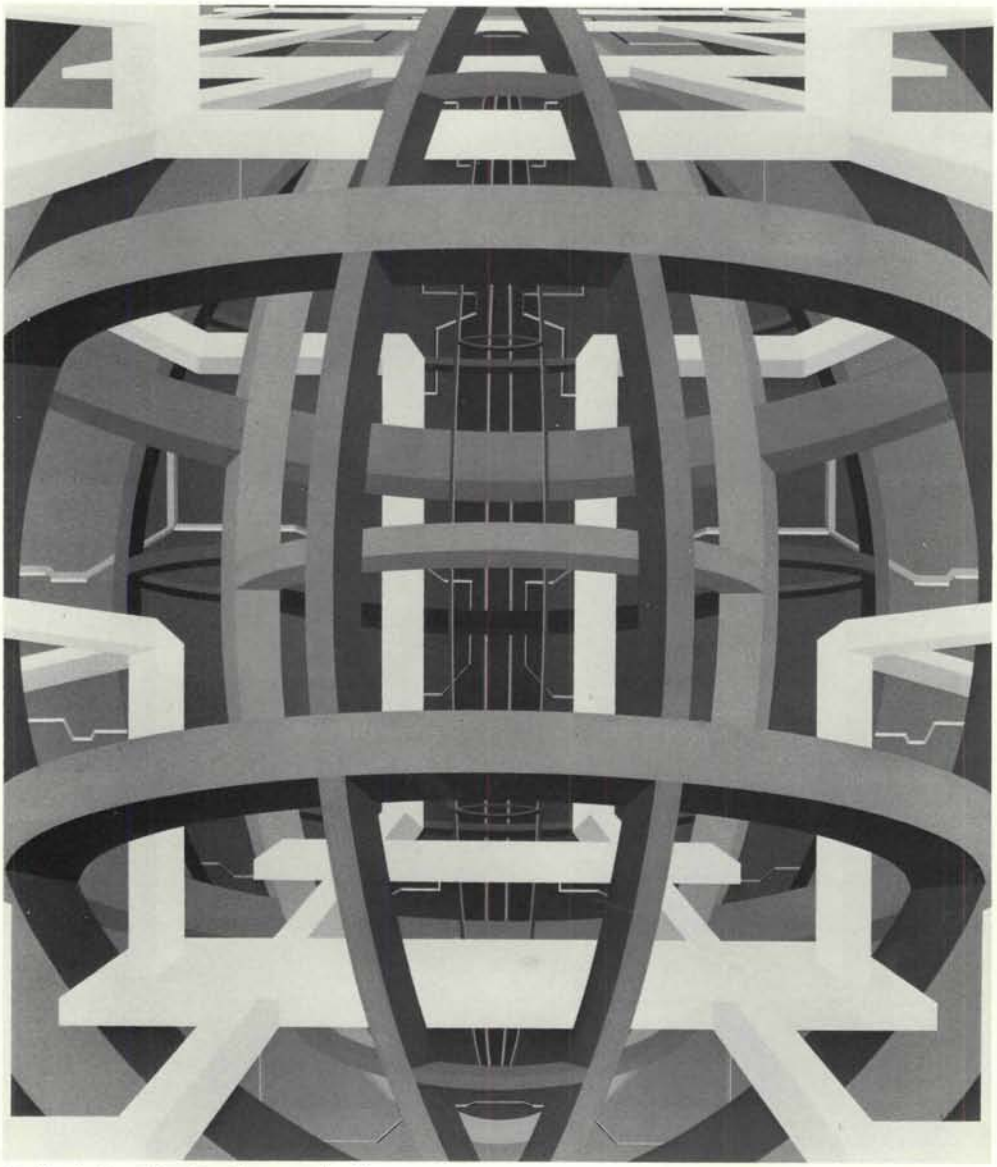

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The tall building artistically reconsidered

by Ada Louise Huxtable

The skyscraper and the twentieth century are synonymous; the tall building is the landmark of our age. As a structural marvel that breaks the traditional limits on mankind's persistent ambition to build to the heavens, the skyscraper is this century's most stunning architectural phenomenon. It is certainly its most overwhelming architectural presence. Shaper of cities and fortunes, it is the dream, past and present, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of almost every architect. From the Tower of Babel onward, the fantasies of builders have been vertical rather than horizontal. Frank Lloyd Wright, caustic critic of cities, could still project a mile-high skyscraper; when the Futurists proclaimed an energetic new world it was in the form of streamlined, soaring towers. These flamboyant visions, full of pride and prejudice, have released architectural talents and egos from the rule of reason and responsibility.

But the question of how to design the tall building has never really been resolved; it continues to plague, disconcert, and confound theorists and practitioners alike. The answers were first sought in models of the past, which were later rejected and then still later rediscovered, carrying reputations up and down with vertiginous regularity. At any point in the cycle, the arguments have an air of messianic conviction fueled by equal amounts of innocence and ignorance. In the final analysis, the results are controlled less by any calculated intent than by those subtle manipulators of art and ideas—taste, fashion, and status.

The cycles of taste and the evaluation of the product are complicated further by the fact that architecture, like other arts, has not been free from the ideological politics, cliques, and skillful and often venomous *ad hominem* attacks that are a curious and constant part of the art world. This fact has never been more obvious than it is in architecture today. There is a kind of guerrilla intellectual warfare operating from academia to the media, motivated by something that is unique to architecture—the direct connection between the bases of power and extremely lucrative work. Nowhere are the battlelines more clearly drawn than on the skyline. The modernist-postmodernist camps are in hand-to-hand, building-to-building, polemic-to-polemic combat on a huge scale, the postmodernists as intent on breaking rules and heads as on pursuing artistic frontiers. The script is familiar. Heroes are turned into villains, and the overthrow of the old regime is accompanied by the savaging of its leaders and the ravages of cultural revolution. The sound of smashing idols is everywhere.

All this is not news; the swings of art and taste are as certain as the seasons, and men with ideas who hope to change the world tend to behave no better than those who merely suffer the consequences. But in this hostile intellectual and artistic atmosphere, the skyscraper is being discussed and dis-

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sected with more intensity than at any time since the name was coined for the multistoried office building some time around 1890. The revisionists are busy rewriting history in terms of omission and rediscovery, which is fine, and they are also rewriting the rules of skyscraper design, which is not quite so acceptable or admirable. In the process, the right lessons are often being discarded for the wrong ones.

In its most familiar and exhilarating aspect, the skyscraper has been a celebration of modern building technology. But it is just as much a product of zoning and tax law, the real estate and money markets, code and client requirements, energy and aesthetics, politics and speculation. Not least is the fact that it is the biggest investment game in town.

With all of this, and often in spite of it, the skyscraper is still an art form. The tall building has that in common with all major works of architecture consciously conceived in aesthetic terms. Every radical advance or conservative retrenchment that has been proclaimed as the latest revelation of truth and beauty has actually been devoted to a single, unchanging, unifying idea and purpose: the search for a skyscraper style. The tall building has been designed well, and even brilliantly, in many different ways, and the exotic variety that marks the best of the tall buildings is inconsistent and irreconcilable in theoretical or doctrinaire terms. There are not, and never have been, any immutable rules; there is more than one way to skin a skyscraper. Contrary to accepted opinion and the respected critical texts, there have been many appropriate and legitimate responses to the conflicting cultural forces of our time.

This reality—the doctrine of irreconcilability—has never been accepted. We are edging toward it with talk of diversity and pluralism. As time passes and towers multiply, it is increasingly clear that skyscraper design has been motivated, above all, by an unresolved search for style, which is its only aesthetic consistency. No matter how revolutionary the rationale, how startling the claims of aesthetic breakthrough, how great the debt to advances in engineering, or how many times the old is discarded for the new, the objective has been the same. Proclamations of innovation and reform and protestations of use and suitability have all served the same end. That there has been this overriding, aesthetic preoccupation should not be surprising. Architecture is, admittedly, an extremely complex and pragmatic art, but it is an art nonetheless, and one which endures on its final quality. Only when a building transcends its inconvenient marriage of aesthetics and economics does it become convincing, and even great, architecture.

It is the rare architect who does not hope in his heart to design a great building and for whom the quest is not a quiet, consuming passion. Architects talk about little else to their peers; they seem obsessed with the aesthetic implication of their designs in word and print. A good deal less is said about this in the client boardroom, where the architect tells it not the way it is but the way it sells. There are some extraordinary reasons given for some extraordinary stylistic flourishes. But because architecture is a practical art, and practical men pay the bills, the search for style has been rationalized and camouflaged, not only to suit the prevailing intellectual fashion but to provide client reassurance that nothing so arcane is influencing efficiency and the financial bottom line. It is the singular architect, in fact, someone like Philip Johnson, who can walk in and tell corporate directors that they are getting art and get away with it. But in his case personality and product together constitute the art form.

The architecture of the tall building has never been more on people's minds, if one judges by public and press attention to the subject. Beyond aesthetics, however, there are serious questions of cause and effect, propriety and place, structure and style, that are not being addressed. There are pivotal issues of enormous importance to the design of the tall building, both subtle and complex, from the humanitarian to the historical, that need careful scrutiny. There is

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an incredible default of critical appraisal where it counts, and where it hurts, in the lives of cities and people.

The most obvious blind spot comes in the failure to recognize the fact that the skyscraper itself—still on the rise and increasing spectacularly in number and size—may have overreached itself, and may even be nearing the end of the line. There is both irony and tragedy in the realization that this is happening at the same time that the question of design has been creatively re-opened by the loosening of modernist strictures, and at the moment when the exploration of the tall building's inherent power, drama, and beauty offers greater options than ever before. We are seeing some spectacular new building, but we are also seeing signs of a disturbing dead end in scale and impact, and a frivolous dead end in style. While the aesthetic debate becomes more recondite and self-serving, the effect of the tall building on our overcrowded, malfunctioning, and deteriorating cities has become demonstrably destructive and dehumanizing.

Today architects are looking at some very big buildings in some very small ways. The larger the structure, the less inclination there seems to be to come to grips with the complexities of its condition and the dilemma it creates. It is no longer considered necessary to look beyond the street facade. The examples of history, respectable again after half a century of denial, are being mined for nostalgia, novelty, and innuendo. But history should teach reasonable and profound lessons about the uses of style; it should not be used to supply obscure allusions or decorative ready-mades. An increasingly limited preoccupation with surface appears to be coupled with a sheer, stubborn disregard for the people and the cities the structures serve. The awe and wonder that architects first felt about the technological breakthrough and the new aesthetic limits of the tall building, and their expressed desire to integrate these innovations into the social and urban fabric, have been replaced by a very narrow vision in which formal effect, novelty, and obsessive self-expression are primary concerns.

One does not expect the larger contextual vision from builders and bankers, for whom investment is primary. But one does expect it from architects, as part of a responsible design process. Certainly we have long passed the point where anyone believes that the architect can solve the ills of society or remake the environment, or even that he should try. But there is still a responsibility to incorporate into design solutions considerations of the real world and humanistic and environmental values and goals that go beyond scenographic fun and games. If the architect has erred in the past by claiming powers beyond his art, he has now reversed himself and is diminishing that art. He has no one to blame but himself if he finally makes his work seem marginal. The latest aesthetic trend seems to be toward a kind of monster picturesqueness, an approach that subverts and denies the real scope and purpose of building. If it is possible to trivialize anything as large as the skyscraper, that process is taking place now. This default of intent and meaning diminishes all architecture in a very real sense.

But the most immediate casualty has been in critical standards of judgment. What is lost in the emphasis on architecture for art's sake are broad, objective criteria by which all styles and approaches must properly be judged. These are the enduring principles that relate the problem to the solution; what is involved is the creative fusion of structure and appearance in the service of utility and profit that has informed the best tall buildings.

That these principles of skyscraper design are being attacked as part of the well-publicized rejection of modern architecture is deeply disturbing, because they have been thought about carefully and well during the last hundred years, and they have a lot going for them as the appropriate and sometimes inspired translation of technology and market forces into art. A successful skyscraper solution, and the art of architecture itself, depend on how well the structural, utilitarian, environmental, and public roles of the

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tall building are resolved. Style—any style—must be intrinsic to, and expressive of, these considerations. Architecture is, above all, an expressive art.

The success or failure of a building is ultimately measured by how well these factors have coalesced into a unified, expressive whole. When the result adds a special dimension to personal and urban experience, when that expressive object forever transforms the concept or vision of the environment, when it alters the popular received image, it is proper to say that a major architectural contribution has been made. The proof, of course, is that after certain buildings have appeared—the Parthenon, the Pazzi Chapel, the Villa Savoie—the world has been altered in a subtle and substantial way; cities never look the same again.

Surely that is true of the tall building; the skyscraper has totally changed the scale and appearance and concept of cities and the perceptions of people in them. The public has always loved these architectural aberrations—like freaks of all kinds. The title of the world's tallest building has a fleeting but special cachet; it is a favored setting for publicity stunts and self-celebrations, media events, and cinema mythology. But if the status and drama of the tall building, its engineering and architectural achievements, its embodiment of superlatives, are universally admired, the philosophical questions that it raises continue to be disturbing: its symbolism is complex, its role in the life of the city and the individual is vexing, and its impact is shattering. The skyscraper is Orwellian or Olympian, depending on how you look at it.

For the skyscraper is not only the building of the century, it is also the single work of architecture that can be studied as the embodiment and expression of much that makes the century what it is. Today's tall building is a puzzling and paradoxical package. Its standardized, characterless, impersonal space creates the recognizable, charismatic monuments and the enduring image of twentieth-century cities. For better or for worse, it is measure, parameter, or apotheosis of our consumer and corporate culture. No other building type incorporates so many of the forces of the modern world, or has been so expressive of changing belief systems and so responsive to changing tastes and practices. It romanticizes power and the urban condition and celebrates leverage and cash flow. Its less romantic side effects are greed and chaos writ monstrously large. The tall building probes our collective psyche as it probes the sky.

In sum, the skyscraper—in terms of size, structure, and function, scale and symbolism, and, above all, human and urban impact—remains the single most challenging design problem of our time. The other definitive architectural challenge, housing, will continue to lack patronage and priorities because it answers to social rather than to business needs. The twentieth-century architect's most telling and lasting response to his age is the topless tower of trade.

The tall building today is also an enormous and cautionary symbol of the changes taking place at a rapid rate in the philosophy and practice of architecture, changes that have polarized the profession. It serves as both standard-bearer and whipping-boy for modernists and postmodernists of every persuasion. Today's skyscraper stands at a crossroads between a new and an old vision —between architecture as mission and architecture as style—in one of the most significant transitional periods in the history of art.

Louis Sullivan, whose early skyscraper solutions have still not been surpassed, discussed its aesthetic and philosophical aspects in an 1896 article called "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." Like the tall building itself, the essay is an uneasy synthesis of poetry and logic. But the questions Sullivan raised about the design of the tall building remain pertinent, unsettled —and unsettling—today. They are, in fact, more pressing than ever.

I have entitled this essay "The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered" in homage to Sullivan, and because I believe the time has come for a critical revaluation beyond what is currently passing by that name. The his-

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tory of the skyscraper to date is incomplete and misleading. Like a Rashomon account, it has been told from a number of restricted and subjective points of view which still need to be brought together in a unified whole. Until now, the perception of the design development of the tall building has been tailored to suit those who have made taste and written history in this highly polemical century. We have the brilliant, insightful, but carefully selective version by Sigfried Giedion, in the mainstream of modernist doctrine. Winston Weisman's researches have dealt authoritatively with definition and chronology. The technology of the skyscraper has been thoroughly documented by Carl Condit. But the omissions are as important as the inclusions, and the story is just beginning to be rewritten, along with much nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. The result, however, is a new kind of imbalance that may be the normal price of radical revisionism, and even with the gaps being filled distortions continue. If the architectural deck has been stacked unfairly in the past, it is being shuffled and restacked just as erroneously now, with the "outs" replacing the "ins" and one set of preferences, or prejudices, being substituted for another.

Aesthetic interpretations of the design of the tall building have always absorbed architects and critics. But the basic questions remain the same. How to clothe the new, naked skeleton? How to make this attenuated giant fit into existing architectural conventions? How to deal with a setting totally alien to its scale, structure, and use? The answers, then as now, have evolved as much from temperament as from art. From the start there were the conservatives who were sure that the only safe, sanctified solutions must come from tradition, and the radicals who believed that a leap of faith into the future must be made through a brave break with the past. Today, curiously enough, those roles have been reversed. Radicalism is represented by a respect for the past that was outlawed by the modern movement, a return to sources appearing in a number of idiosyncratic guises, while conservatism is marked by an adherence to the doctrine of established modernism.

By the turn of the century, the distinguished architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler was calling openly for "aberrations." It was the "deviation from the customary structure or type," he said, that would break new ground. Schuyler repeatedly attacked formulas derived from historical precedent as baseless or arbitrary; they followed assumptions that were true for masonry, he said, but false and obsolete for steel. The results were not solutions, in his reasoning, but evasions of the real nature and problem of the modern office building.

A more representative and conventional viewpoint was offered to the thirty-third convention of the American Institute of Architects meeting in Pittsburgh in 1899. In a paper called "The Legitimate Design of the Architectural Casing for Steel Skeleton Structures" a respected turn-of-the-century practitioner, C. H. Blackall, asked: "Should we break away from the precedents of the past . . . ?" The answer, he said, "involves a consideration of what constitutes legitimate design. Illegitimacy, as we well know, is defined as unrecognized parentage . . . . [T]he most truly legitimate of all architectural design is the one which has survived, in its various modifications, through the wreck of the Roman Empire, the untoward influences of the Vandals and the Goths, and has come to us still intact in spirit after all scathing modern episodes . . . . We are safer following pretty closely the line of Classic architecture and Italian Renaissance," he concluded, "and there is more hope for a good copy than there is for a bad original." So much for aberrations.

What Schuyler was attacking and Blackall was defending at that time was the increasingly popular idea that the tall building should be treated as a classical column, an analogy that yielded a tripartite division into base, shaft, and capital. To Schuyler this was the kind of "arbitrary assumption" that could "obstruct the detailed expression in

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design of structure and function." But it had enormous appeal for Beaux Arts trained practitioners, and for all those who subscribed to the popular Aristotelian principle that a work of art should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It evoked the mysteries of trinities in nature. It suggested golden proportions and the beauties of organic form. Blackall referred to the work of Louis Sullivan with faint praise and little sympathy as the "extreme impressionistic school." To Schuyler, Sullivan's buildings were the admirable aberrations that broke new ground. Sullivan himself, in "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," took issue with the classicists. "Form ever follows function," he wrote in a famous statement that has since been stripped and sanitized of all of Sullivan's lyricism by the literalness of later generations. He spoke not of classical analogies but of the intrinsic and expressive relationships of form and structure in nature and in art.

Looking at the whole historical spectrum of skyscraper design, we can identify four significant phases: the functional, the eclectic, the modern, and the postmodern—the last more descriptive of the state of mind of its practitioners than of any real success in cutting the modernist umbilical cord. It is significant that all of the most important structural solutions came early in the development of the tall building, in a remarkably short space of time. Because these structures were concentrated in Chicago in the two decades at the end of the last century, other burgeoning cities quickly acknowledged the "Chicago style" in their commercial construction.

It has been customary, or one might say mandatory, in the right art history circles to draw a straight line from this early Chicago School to the fully developed modernism of the twentieth century, dismissing everything in between as unacceptable architectural behavior. This has consigned a large body of significant work to a kind of limbo. As a result, both our perception of the time frame within which important stylistic changes occurred and our evaluation of their worth has been faulty and self-serving. The eclectic and modern phases—or modernist, as the latter is now called—were actually of about the same duration, and both lasted much longer than the initial period of innovation. There was a significant, unacknowledged overlap, with the modern phase moving into ascendancy only after the Second World War.

The modernist skyscraper, however, has been endorsed by scholars and critics in terms of an "authenticity" that the eclectic work has been denied. That is a defensible, if currently unpopular, position. Style is creative change in response to cultural change; it is the way in which that culture expresses the conditions of a particular society and time. This creative process inevitably produces the most original and interesting results. Defining the creative force in these terms has worked very well for the rest of art history. An innovative talent will engage the imagination more than a polished practitioner of tradition, even when the experiments are flawed or the conventions are impeccable. It is the uneven frontiers of creativity, with their disturbing and energizing combination of brilliant insights and inevitable judgmental errors, that reveal new aspects of humanity and the physical world and map new aesthetic territory.

The problem of those buildings that espoused Classical or Gothic or Renaissance sources over *"l'esprit nouveau"* or "form follows function" is that they muddied the radical modernist line. The idea of aesthetic coexistence had no meaning at all for the theorists of the early twentieth century, who were single-mindedly focused on sweeping revolution in everything from art to the human condition. We are only beginning to understand and accept the artistic and cultural complexity of a century that has been vastly oversimplified. We are shortchanging our own art when we deny its contrasts and contradictions. The search for consistency and conviction is one way of trying to pull back from the threat of chaos and the loss of traditional beliefs and values that characterize our time. And we fail to come to terms

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with the difficult meanings of this turbulence when we dismiss it with the bland put-down and cop-out of undifferentiated "pluralism."

Except for popular mythology and a totemic fascination with the skyscraper, its history has been too narrowly focused. There is general agreement on the significance of certain structures and events, such as those innovations that had their roots in many places and flowered in Chicago in the late nineteenth century. At that time, and in that place, a unique combination of industrialization, business, and real estate came together for the development of a new and distinctive building type: the American office building.

In the first, or what might be called the functional, phase of this new structural phenomenon, architecture was the servant of engineering. Rapid increases in building height were made possible by advances in fireproofing, metal framing, and the passenger elevator, as well as by less glamorous improvements in footings and foundations, plumbing, heating, lighting, and ventilation. Much larger buildings were encouraged by the rapid erection of the metal frame and curtain wall, the growth of cities and business, and the need and desire to house commercial operations that employed many people on increasingly congested and expensive urban sites. Essentially, the early skyscraper was an economic phenomenon in which business was the engine that drove innovation. The patron was the investment banker and the muse was cost-efficiency. Design was tied to the business bottom line, and style was secondary to the primary factors of investment and use.

The structural systems devised were simple and replicable. Aesthetic considerations became a subordinate function of the profitable development of land encouraged by advances in steel manufacture, skeleton construction, and mechanical services. No one was concerned with landmarks, or milestones, or icons, beyond the obvious identification of profit and prestige—least of all, with the stylistic resolution of a new building type. The priorities of the men who put up these buildings were economy, efficiency, size, and speed. With the later emphasis on artificial light and climate control—both a function of cheap American energy—all serious limitations were eventually removed from how big the building could be and the way it could be designed.

The pragmatism that controlled this first phase of the American skyscraper is usually laid to the philistinism and hard-nosed economic practices of the late nineteenth-century Middlewestern entrepreneur. But enthusiasm for the new Chicago buildings was shared by bankers and businessmen from the cultural centers of the Eastern establishment, who also knew a good thing when they saw it. The builders of one of Chicago's most distinguished early commercial landmarks, Burnham and Root's Monadnock Block of 1889-91, were Peter and Shephard Brooks of Boston.

A revealing quotation has been supplied by John Coolidge from a letter of May 6, 1894, written by Peter Charndon Brooks to Owen Aldis, the Chicago lawyer who managed the Brooks's Chicago real estate. The Monadnock Block was built with interior metal framing and masonry bearing walls, a type of transitional construction favored for a while over the skeleton frame and curtain wall, as it was thought to be more fireproof. The building has been noted for the simplicity of its smooth, flat surfaces, its monumental silhouette, and the subtly battered and color-graded walls that substitute for ornament.

One assumes that the instructions given to Aldis found their way to the architects, Burnham and Root. "My notion," Brooks wrote, "is to have no projecting surfaces or indentations, but to have everything flush or flat or smooth with the walls—projections mean dirt, nor do they add strength to the building . . . . [O]ne great nuisance is the lodgement of pigeons and sparrows." This was hardly a mandate for high art. But these purely practical considerations were turned into a satisfactory aesthetic by the architects

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in an extreme but fairly representative demonstration of the role restrictive provisions can play in the shaping of a creative architectural solution.

Other impressive buildings came out of equally pragmatic requirements. The famous Chicago window, a three-part, projecting bay that created the extremely lively, plastic facades of structures like the Reliance and Tacoma Buildings of 1890 and 1889 was a device to capture as much light as possible for the purpose of increasing the rental value of the offices. There was minimal interest in dressing up the new curtain walls; the idea was to enclose the skeleton frame in the least costly fashion.

Is it a paradox that these buildings—dictated overwhelmingly by economics and expediency—have been recognized and admired internationally as superior architectural achievements? Chicago is a favorite pilgrimage point for European architects of all generations. A talented group of younger, native practitioners is intensely aware of the city's early skyscraper history. The Chicago firm of Booth, Hansen and Associates, designing a moderately tall building, looks to its architectural origins, rather ambitiously seeking "the quality of Root and Sullivan . . . organic structure, allegory to nature, and an American character." There is a conscious attempt today to build on, and in, the Chicago tradition.

These early structures are as handsome as they are utilitarian. They possess a great strength and clarity that gives them remarkable expressive power. We are as pleased by their art as their builders were by their technology. But we can also see that it is precisely the linkage between the two—art and technology—that is the secret of their distinctive and superior style.

In 1931, the building generally believed to be the first example of true skyscraper construction was demolished in Chicago. The Home Insurance Building of 1884-85, by William LeBaron Jenney, was dismantled with great care by a special investigating committee of the Marshall Field estate, which determined that the building's claims of fathering the modern city were true; a metal skeleton frame supported both its inner weight and outer walls. That fact ascertained, the first building to reach for the sky bit the dust to make way for another—a gesture in the true Chicago spirit. From the Home Insurance Building on, the height and appearance of the tall building were to be controlled only by engineering ingenuity and economic formulas.

But the design debate about the skyscraper's artistic problems grew as quickly as its size, and as soon led to the invocation of traditional models. The second phase of skyscraper design sought solutions through academic sources and historical precedents. This eclectic phase, which was fueled by the ascendance of the Academy and the popularity of the Beaux Arts in this country, continued well into the twentieth century, until both debate and construction were stopped by the Great Depression.

The eclectic phase produced some of the skyscraper's most remarkable monuments. The raids on the past ranged from banal to brilliant: the Gothic reached for the heavens as never before; assorted versions of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, Greek temples, and Italian campanili raised their heads repeatedly in the sky. There were stretch-Renaissance palazzi and zoom-chateaux. The size and style of these buildings made them spectacular and recognizable monuments, but their unique and unreproducible features are their sophisticated scholarship and superbly executed detail. The best examples were skilled academic exercises adapted with great ingenuity, drama, and, occasionally, real beauty to the totally new needs and aspirations of the twentieth-century city. Although the elite position has been to act as if they are, at best, pardonable eccentricities, or, at worst, giant blots on the skyscape, they took their place instantly in the history of architecture.

The modernists have always read the academic victory as an architectural defeat. The characteristic of the eclectic phase that seemed like the cardinal architectural sin

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was not that its practitioners failed to seek new forms, which was bad enough, but that they placed such heavy emphasis on romantic recall and ornamental embellishment. After a long, austere diet of rationalism, however, younger architects are again delighting in this exotic and exuberant excess, and even an older generation is seeing these buildings with new eyes.

The tall building that was considered an exemplar of the eclectic mode at the end of the nineteenth century was Bruce Price's American Surety Building of 1894-96 in New York. Its classical, tripartite division was widely discussed and approved, and it easily drew as much attention as a trendsetter as some of today's more eccentric towers. It is still a substantial and handsome structure, recycled in 1975 by the Bank of Tokyo.

The American Surety Building followed another well-publicized New York example, George B. Post's Produce Exchange of 1883-84, which was being completed at the same time that Jenney's Home Insurance Building was going up in Chicago. The Produce Exchange was a horizontal rather than a vertical building, but we are told by Carl Condit that Post may have used a true skeleton for the trading room slightly in advance of Jenney's landmark. Post himself claimed that only New York's building code, which required twelve-inch thick walls in the 1880s, kept him from using curtain walls throughout.

The Exchange's exterior walls were impressively stylish, however; they would have horrified Peter Brooks. Tiered arcades of dark red Philadelphia pressed brick were embellished with terra-cotta medallions of appropriate character—corn, cows, and pigs between forty-five-foot arches representing the original thirteen states. This blend of patriotism and pragmatism was supposed to take its aesthetic cues from Sansovino; the building was called, at the time, "modified Italian Renaissance" or "Venetian Roman-Gothic."

Critical opinion about the Produce Exchange was divided; it was hailed as "an object of permanent beauty" and derided as an "incarnation of sumach." The historian Talbot Hamlin later judged the building the best of Post's work, "striking in color . . . powerful in design . . . expressive of its time." The Produce Exchange was a curious hybrid, a kind of Yankee Doodle Beaux Arts, but it was a wonderfully strong design —a typically unabashed combination of American technology and vigorously bowdlerized European sources. When it was demolished in 1957 the job required a full arsenal of bulldozer, jackhammer, and wrecking ball, and revealed cast-iron columns, wrought-iron beams, and tie-rods of structural steel. The successor at Two Broadway, a legitimate descendant if one considers only the engineering drawings, looks as if it could be demolished with a can opener.

In 1894, when Price's American Surety Building was still in the design stage, a study directed to the resolution of the artistic problems of the new, tall office building was published by the respected and widely followed architectural periodical, *The American Architect and Building News*. The project was carried out by John Moser, a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, who was commended by the author of the article for "honestly and manfully [approaching] the problem from the constructive side . . . as a necessity of modern life." Moser's avowed purpose was "to express, not hide or falsify, our incomparable modern steel construction, so that anyone, at a glance, may see how it is built, and so feel that it is strong and majestic." (Majestic is not a word or an idea that anyone has quite had the courage to revive overtly in an egalitarian, pluralistic society.) But the architect's "expressive honesty" led, surprisingly, backwards. "After the most mature consideration," he wrote, "I found myself getting very close to the Classic."

The building illustrated was divided into three sections suggesting the base, shaft, and capital of a classical column, an approach widely endorsed at the time as the most valid artistic solution of the problem. The pilasters with which a large number of

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floors were embraced, Moser admitted, gave him trouble, but his solution was, indeed, manful. "I pierced them," he explained, "bases, caps and all, the spaces between them being pierced with windows, [and] dressed them up with as agreeable forms as possible." In order to keep the twenty-story building from looking "attenuated," and to decrease the emphasis on its excessive height, it was topped with a cornice large and heavy enough to sink a battleship.

Having created an elaborate, heavy-handed, and leaden mass singularly lacking in expressive grace, Moser offered a curiously contradictory prediction: "The office building of the future will be useful and practical," he wrote. "It will tell exactly what it is and pretend to be nothing else . . . . It will be elegant by virtue of its proportions, its refined simplicity and a skillful handling of its few ornamental forms."

What this described precisely, if with no intention of doing so, was the work of Louis Sullivan, who had fulfilled the prophecy by 1900. In the 1890s, Sullivan produced a series of masterful, original tall buildings, at first with his partner, Dankmar Adler, and later alone, that created what everyone was looking for: a skyscraper style. Running as a counter-current to the rushing rivers of eclecticism was Sullivan's less-than-popular insistence that form followed function, not academic precedent. He believed that the design of the skyscraper was the creative translation of structure and plan into appropriate cladding and ornament, and that the answers were not to be found in the rules and practice of the past.

The Wainwright Building of 1890-91 in St. Louis, the Guaranty Building of 1894-95 in Buffalo, and the Carson Pirie Scott Store of 1899-1901 in Chicago are among those structures that tell you exactly what they are. They are consummately elegant by virtue of Moser's own criteria: their proportions, the simplicity and clarity of those relationships of structure and enclosure, and the skilled use of an extraordinary ornament. Far from de-emphasizing their height with academic stolidity, Sullivan delighted in celebrating their "loftiness," although they no longer seem high to us now. The tall building was not to be brought down to earth, he said, in another famous quotation; it was to be "a proud and soaring thing."

To this task, in the words of historian and critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Sullivan brought "a full, subtle deployment of architectural resources." The rational simplicity of the early Chicago School had not ever been lost. But Sullivan carried the solution of the tall building to a more thoughtful and sensitive level of interpretation and embellishment, and a much more sophisticated kind of design. Montgomery Schuyler, in "The Skyscraper Up-to-Date," used Sullivan's Bayard Building of 1897-99 as an example of successful and appropriate tall-building design. The Bayard, originally the Condict Building, still stands on Bleeker Street in New York, its lower floors mutilated but the whole enduringly handsome. It has been renovated and advertised as "Louis Sullivan's only building in New York" after years of dingy, marginal existence.

"Everywhere the drapery of clay is a mere wrapping," Schuyler wrote when the Bayard Building was new, "which clings so closely to the frame as to reveal it, and even to emphasize it. The actual structure is left, or, rather, is helped, to tell its own story. It is an attempt, and a very serious attempt, to found the architecture of a tall building upon the facts of the case. This is the thing itself." The decoration, Schuyler noted, was of a quality no other designer could have commanded, "and is responsible for much of the building's esthetic as distinguished from its scientific attractiveness." But it is the quality of the whole—that blend of the scientific and the aesthetic—that Schuyler understood and that few designers have commanded as well. Sullivan raised the "facts of the case"—which so distinguished the early Chicago skyscraper—to the status of art.

Louis Sullivan's achievement has never been discredited, but it has been misunderstood. The modernists looked at his work with a

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selective bias, carefully misreading his intentions, blind to the facts of the case. They accepted his science and rejected his aesthetics. They could never come to terms with his florid romanticism, and the lusher his ornament, the more they averted their eyes. That ornament was not anachronistic or out of place in Sullivan's own work or time, but it was incompatible with the modernists' attempts to reshape history and art to their purified revolutionary doctrines. Sullivan reserved his aesthetic options for subtler and more traditional things—the horizontal or vertical emphasis of the structural frame, for example—often achieving a delicate and remarkable equilibrium reflecting the kind of visual and visceral balance of which art is made. But his designs were admired by the modernists only according to how literally, or "truthfully," their construction was revealed. He was denied his poetic license.

Sullivan was a difficult case, because no matter how much his critics condemned what they considered his decorative backsliding, the logic, beauty, and originality of his solution was always clear. Like the modernists, he dismissed historical models. In "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" he warned that the skyscraper should not "be made a field for the display of architectural knowledge in the encyclopedic sense." But while he rejected the idea of scholarly sources, he did not deny the traditional architectural values and relationships of the decorated form.

Sullivan's highly personal search was soon eclipsed by the academic avalanche. The successful eclectic skyscraper, however, never actually violated Sullivan's insistence that form follows function in the broader sense, or Schuyler's conviction that the design of the tall building must be founded on the facts of the case. These structures take learned liberties, but they are still recognizable as the thing itself. Their indulgence is academic, rather than poetic, license. Cass Gilbert's French Renaissance West Street building of 1905 and Gothic Woolworth Building of 1913, both in New York, state the facts of the case with superb visual richness and a masterful handling of the special problems of unprecedented size. These and other examples deal, if not directly, at least metaphorically and ornamentally, with the difficult realities of structure and scale. Style, whatever its source, was used as an instrument for dramatizing the facts of the case.

By 1922, the famous international competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower demonstrated the full strength and range of the eclectic phase. This competition, which called for "the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world" and drew more than two hundred submissions from twenty-three countries, was one of those benchmark events in the arts: it crystallized a unique moment in architecture when the long, classical tradition was poised on the edge of the unknown abyss of modernism. The entries were a startling mix of the adventurous and the *retardataire,* but what is particularly interesting is that so many of the designs were so very good; the massing, scale, and detail of the tall building were well understood in any number of guises.

The subsequent bitter debate between those who championed the Gothic revival of the winning tower by Howells and Hood against the romantic Finnish modernism of Eliel Saarinen's second prize design or the radical modernism of Walter Gropius's submission from the Bauhaus seems, in perspective, quite beside the point. Just as provocative today, and also impressive, are such less familiar entries as a surprising number of Dutch examples that fall stylistically between Berlage and De Stijl. There were even submissions of a type now called "commentary," for example Adolf Loos's enormous classical column, which could have been conscious, or unconscious, irony; for all we know—and some scholar surely does, or will[1]—he may have been playing it straight.

The Tribune Tower competition has been

1 The most recent discussion appears in Gravagnuolo Benedetto's "The 'Chicago Tribune' Column," an essay in *Adoph Loos,* recently published by Rizzoli.

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held up by the modernists as a sad and ludicrous example of what went wrong with skyscraper design after Sullivan—a fall from aesthetic grace. From today's perspective, however, it forms a remarkably accurate historical document of the state of the art of the skyscraper at the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century. What seemed improbable at that moment was that modernism was to supplant eclecticism as the architecture of the establishment in another twenty-five years. But the rout of tradition and the acceptance of the new was neither quick nor clear; the course of true modernism did not run as smoothly as historians have chosen to tell it. Until recently, it has been inadmissible in proper intellectual and artistic circles to point out that there was a "modern-modernistic" dichotomy rather than the direct revolutionary line to which all the faithful immediately adhered. The conventional and respectable architectural wisdom has treated this conflict as a split between good and bad design, between serious and frivolous art, between aesthetic enlightenment and vestigial, uncomprehending vulgarity—in short, between virtue and sin.

The modern phase of skyscraper design actually embraced this dual aesthetic in two separate but parallel strains. "Modern" was radical, reductive, and reformist; "modernistic" was richly decorative and attached to conservative and hedonistic values. "Modern" was the austere, abstract, elite, avant-garde work of the European school of Gropius, Mies, and Le Corbusier, united in its early days under the rubric of the International Style. "Modernistic" was neither pure nor revolutionary; it fused the ornamental and the exotic for what was really the last great decorative style. Derived from the luxurious, exotic combination of new and old materials and the traditional fine craftsmanship that characterized the products of the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratives et Industrielles, "modernistic" was despised by the avant-garde as fussy, reactionary, and, of course, bourgeois-decadent. Now called Art Moderne or Deco, it is having a trendy revival, but "modernistic" was the name used at the time—innocently by its admirers and scathingly by its critics. The modern-modernistic split was more than style-deep, however; the reformers saw modern as both moral and beautiful; it held the promise of a better world through design. They considered the more fashionable modernistic as the betrayal of that promise and the denial of art as an instrument of social change.

Some of the century's most seductive skyscrapers are modernistic, including Holabird and Root's very beautiful drawings of executed and unexecuted work in Chicago, and a number of pre-Crash towers in New York's financial district. Others, like Howells and Hood's New York Daily News Building of 1930, fell between modern and modernistic, confounding the critics, who prefer ideological tidiness. The style died with the Depression, when construction stopped after the completion of the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings in 1930 and 1931. Rockefeller Center was its protracted swan song, and although the complex's modernistic detailing and debt to Beaux-Arts planning were ritually deplored until recently, this superior piece of urban design has taught important lessons about cities and style that are now universally acknowledged.

"True" modernism was pioneered by a handful of adherents to the radical, reductive International Style and its other European equivalents in the 1920s. Its scope and history are still little known or understood in this country, where it arrived in a bowdlerized and amputated form in the famous Museum of Modern Art "Modern Architecture" show organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932 and in their enormously influential book, *The International Style*. This limited aesthetic version stripped the work of much of its cultural context and currency. Nor was much built in this genre in the United States. While there was a large body of significant work abroad dating from the immediate post-World War I period, only small, token structures appeared here, quite late, in the

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1930s. At first, it was a showcase style of the avant-garde. Much later, in an even greater transformation, it became the architecture of the establishment. By mid-century, the revolutionary ideal and aesthetic had been turned into slick, profitable formulas that had lost an enormous amount in the translation from the European originals to American commercial practice.

The leaders of early European modernism were architects of monumental and obsessive vision who rank high among the creative minds and talents of our time. Their artistic stature has much to do with the quality, importance, and influence of their work, and of the modern movement itself. In the final analysis, this will make the position of modernism stubbornly resistant to even the most assiduous downgrading.

The early modern, or International Style, skyscrapers are few in number; they required clients with cash, courage, and a highly developed sense of aesthetic mission. Theoretically, the combination of form and function these buildings endorsed was supposed to be beyond style; actually, style was their most enduring product. The McGraw-Hill Building of 1931, constructed in midtown Manhattan by Hood, Godley and Fouilhoux, is a notable example, and the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building of 1930-31, by Howe and Lescaze, is a total work of art. The descendants of these buildings are the largely unloved flat-tops and glass boxes—relieved by an occasional modern masterpiece—that make up the High Modern Corporate Style. This is the look that has shaped the skyline of the twentieth-century city and that is now under conspicuous attack.

Not all of those who took up the cause of modern art in the 1920s were International Style party-liners. The influential critic Lewis Mumford expressed his opinions in some memorable columns in *The New Yorker* and *The Architectural Record*. In 1928, he defined the new modern architecture in an *Architectural Record* article called "The Search for Something More." A building should be "the direct, economical expression of material and plan," he wrote. "The clear, lucid expression . . . of form-in-function is what constitutes the modern feeling." But, he added, going beyond the ritual revolutionary declarations, "there must be something more." That "something more" he described as a combination of structure and feeling. "It is by utilizing new methods of construction and embodying a new feeling that our modern architecture lives," and it is over the question of what this "something more" must consist of "that the new battle of the styles will be fought."

Significantly, Mumford's "something more" included ornament. Decoration was no "snare and smear" for him, as it was for others; he had generous words for such buildings as Ely Jacques Kahn's new skyscraper at Two Park Avenue with its brightly colored bands of geometric terra-cotta ornament, praising its integration of mass and decoration as "the boldest and clearest note among all our recent achievements in skyscraper architecture . . . . [Here] structure and feeling are at last one."

But the battle of the styles that Mumford expected was never fought in the terms he anticipated. The search for "something more" became "less is more" by mid-century. When business and technology met in extraordinary conjunction in American cities after World War II, the architecture of this latest marriage of convenience—pragmatic, cost-cutting, market-oriented, riding the wave of a business boom—had interesting parallels with the first Chicago School. By one of those odd and fateful coincidences of art history, the modernism of "less is more" was also a simple and replicable style ideally suited for commercial use on a large scale. If its socio-aesthetic ideals proved unrealizable, its design principles were ready-made for economic exploitation. Developers were able to knock them off with the same skill with which they manipulated land and law.

These big buildings have taught us hard lessons. They range from the corruption of art and ideas to unprecedented problems in the

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construction of cities. Such problems, however, owe as much to investment patterns and social upheaval as to aesthetic decisions. But the minimalism of the modernist aesthetic lends itself to a subtle, ascetic beauty or to the cheapest corner-cutting, and since the latter has been the easiest and most profitable route for the builder, an elegant, reductive vocabulary was quickly reduced to a bottom-line banality that its creators never dreamed of. Unfortunately, the loss was of exactly that critical quality of detail, material, and execution on which the modern style depends.

It is indisputable now that modern architecture aimed too high and promised too much; as with much else, a naïve and generous optimism gave way to a disillusioned cynicism that has been characteristic of this century, conditioned by its cataclysmic changes. Still, to dismiss modernism for its flaws is like discarding the plays of Shakespeare for their bowdlerized versions and bad performances. Most of these buildings, too, will have their revisionist judgments in the future.

For the uncorrupted source of this brand of modernism one must go back to the pioneer tall building projects by Mies van der Rohe in Berlin just after the First World War. Anyone who denies the significance or splendor of Mies's seminal designs for the skyscraper not only fails to see these buildings in context but seriously shortchanges art and history. A particular aesthetic vision is a function of a particular time and place—but this work transcends both. The prismatic glass tower scheme of 1919 for the Friedrichstrasse, always shown in abstract isolation, is as responsive to its site as to an ideal vision; the curved glass tower project of 1920-21 is a consummate aesthetic statement of intent and ideal. Here is the quintessential twentieth-century tension between art and technology, between dream and reality; these tall buildings sum up the architectural drama, beauty, and innovative genius of our time. Structure in its most pure and perfect form was enclosed in a sheer curtain of shaped and shimmering glass for a breathtakingly transparent geometry.

Alas, this was a superb skin-and-bones abstraction that reality never could deliver. Mies was a great enough artist to come close a number of times; he produced buildings of sustained beauty and elegance. But like Sullivan, Mies has been misunderstood. It has been popular to point knowingly to piers that never reach the ground and corner details that deliberately short-circuit literal structural truth as proof that his functionalism was faulty. Today's critics are quick to attack the fallacy of his search for universal solutions; his ideal space and modular systems are seen, ironically, as a hopeless Procrustean bed. They deny him his poetic license.

But if that lyricism was lost, a vernacular was gained. I have never shared the view of critics who claim that the glass box is an icy curse visited upon us by the distortion of Mies's "failed" vision. The failed vision is theirs. The Miesian skyscraper is a superb vernacular, probably the handsomest and most useful set of architectural conventions since the Georgian row house. Its rejection is ludicrous and unrealistic. The Miesian aesthetic has produced an eminently suitable twentieth-century vernacular style for this century's unique and overpowering scale—a fact that has yet to be fully realized or appreciated by critics or historians. Vernacular art grows out of the high art of the time and is applied to its common needs and purposes. As with all vernacular architecture, it is the standardization and anonymity of forms reduced to a rational, useful simplicity—here the sleek, reflective surfaces and facets of glass, mirror, and metal—that have universal application and appeal. The result is as right for today's cities as Georgian detail was for the scale and purposes of the eighteenth century. This vernacular accommodates inhuman size, mass, and bulk with an appropriate and saving simplicity. Glass towers, whatever their drawbacks—and most of their faults are independent of aesthetics—make a magnificent street architecture.

The offspring of those two Mies drawings are legion. The standard for quality and

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consistency was set by the work of the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which became the chief interpreters of the Miesian aesthetic and the most prestigious practitioners of the High Modern Corporate Style. These are the skyscrapers of the Fortune 500—suave, skilled variations on the themes of structural rationalism, machine-age luxury, and institutional status. They are the buildings that symbolize the state of the skyscraper art at mid-century—a quarter-century after the Chicago Tribune Tower competition—and in the decades that followed. These skyscrapers are long on understated splendor and structural panache but short on poetic license.

While business and builders were busy exploiting the modern style, another, more subtle, kind of exploitation was being carried out by the architects themselves. Straining at the straitjacket of rigid modernist principles, while giving lip service to them, they found ways to stretch the rules. The sacred dictum that form follows function was being turned into the pursuit of form for its own sake. Structure became sculpture; sometimes the whole building was transformed into a sculptural or decorative object. Or it was conceived as a provocative, abstract play of light, planes, and reflections, a trick done with mirrors, as the glass box gave way to the mirror glass building, a development of considerable aesthetic subtlety and intricacy.

The modern skyscraper, once devoted to a Euclidian simplicity, began to display a far more complex geometry. Very quietly, the rules of rational cause and effect were reversed, and structure became a tool for creating abstract, idiosyncratic, and arbitrary form. Function followed form. Less became quite a lot more. The results ranged from macho contortions to sophisticated experiments aimed at the expansion of the relationships of function and form. Architects were clearly moving to a new phase of design.

In the best of these transitional skyscrapers, Schuyler's "scientific" and "aesthetic" criteria and Mumford's "structure and feeling" were, and are, still working together. Some of the most successful explorations that pushed the frontiers of modernism were carried out early by Philip Johnson, always the leader in the search for the new, before he moved on to a questionable historicism. (It is not the historicism one questions but the architectural results.) The IDS Center in Minneapolis and the Pennzoil Building in Houston, both the work of the Johnson/Burgee firm, fused outer form and inner space in a most provocative way, in the vanguard of a new skyscraper aesthetic. We are able to see and understand and marvel at the synthesis of structure and style in these designs, and even the deliberate bravura with which one controls the other; there is enormous architectural power in the way technical components are utilized for aesthetic effect. This, too, is poetic license, but it is never unrelated to the facts of the case.

In 1974, Arthur Drexler, director of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, dedicated a landmark show to some of the more dramatic distortions of the facts of the case; called "Transformations in Modern Architecture," it demonstrated how a once radical, functionalist rationale had been warped into a new and disturbing formalism. The show's most provocative aspect was that no judgments were made; all examples, from sensitive inquiries to pointless exhibitionism, were shown as a seamless iconographical phenomenon, and there was a high quotient of the perfectly awful. Not surprisingly, the exhibition was extremely controversial.

From the 1960s on, the tenets of modernism were being manipulated to ever greater extremes, until they finally approached a point of rupture where the rules no longer held at all. The commercial debasement of Mies's elegant minimalism was bearing a bitter and boring fruit of abuse and abysmal mediocrity. The sins of modernism are many, as any reader of popular books and articles must know by now, but modernism's real failure has been lost in the avalanche of accusations and confessions. In the

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end, its ultimate and unforgivable sin was the loss of style.

Together, these factors have led to the fourth, or current, phase of skyscraper design, called postmodern. The most conspicuous and questionable characteristic of this development is the renunciation and devaluation of everything the modernists believed in and built—a familiar phenomenon in the history of changing values and institutions, from art to politics. Its most encouraging aspects are the rediscovery of history and the continuum and context of the city, and the recognition of the values of diversity. The postmodernists want everything back that the modernists discarded—history, ornament, context, contrast, variety, symbolism, imagery, and metaphor. And they are off pursuing these things, like Stephen Leacock's legendary horseman, in every direction at once.

Above all, postmodernism is a freewheeling, unfettered, and unapologetic exploration of style. The fact that style is paramount, beyond all other expressed concerns and aspirations, is the source of both its strengths and its weaknesses. The exploration of style can, and does, enlarge the boundaries of art. But in architecture it also creates a special danger; style detached from the conditions and considerations upon which the art of building rests can reduce architecture to something less than its proper role and definition, including its best practice and necessary attachment to reality. This emphasis not only affects the use and value of architecture to society, it ultimately and tragically diminishes it as an art.

Assessments of modernist failures, deserved and undeserved, have been used as the springboard out of the old and into the new, and as justification for the renunciation of the sociological and planning commitments of earlier generations. There are no forbidden routes to style for the postmodernists; everything, past and present, is looked at from the limited perspective of style, and everything is seen as a legitimate source of design. Today's architects are busy overcompensating for decades of sensory deprivation. But above all they are preoccupied with making reputations and images. For many it is no longer considered important, or even necessary, to relate those images to the facts of the case.

Some departures explore history in a scholarly and straightforward way; others are a willful pursuit of those aspects of traditional practice banished by the modernists. Historical sources are used for a personal and even perverse isolation of stylish elements. Those elements are detached from their context and meaning to serve as independent vehicles of ideas or decoration—a practice, unfortunately, that works much better in theory. Postmodernist neo-historicism ranges from Alan Greenberg's literate and literal use of a classical vocabulary for the sanctification of today's cash-and-carry lifestyle to the dreamlike montages of evocations and references that form the private architectural mythology of Michael Graves.

Revisionist taste runs to the elevation of new heroes, preferably those brutally deposed by the modern movement, and to the rediscovery of periods and practitioners that were declared the enemy by its leaders. The singling out of the skilled, academic designs that Sir Edwin Lutyens produced for the British establishment in the early years of this century, for example, has become noticeably obsessive and redundant. A highly arbitrary return to history, often inadequately digested and purposefully misconstrued, is commonly coupled with a warped and disingenuous view of the errors of the modern movement, which, in any event, is considered hopelessly misguided and old hat.

This process only repeats history, of course; the modernists' well-publicized lack of esteem and understanding for the Victorian Age led to the uncomprehending loss of many of its monuments and documents, and to the difficult problems of assessment and appreciation that face scholars now. That same danger is very real and disheartening for the survival of the monuments and documents of the twentieth century. For

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those of us who are more concerned with history than with polemics, or perhaps one should say the history of polemics, the aesthetic significance of the moment is marred by the sabotage of self-serving short-sightedness.

One interesting and insidious aspect of the postmodernists' use of the past is a current phenomenon that goes considerably beyond its architectural manifestation. Today's preferred styles are more than the customary reversals of taste of a transitional period. They seem to express a social and political neo-conservatism that goes beyond the admiration of more conventional and traditional aesthetic values to a kind of longing for the traditional social order and practices those values have served. This attitude runs from simple nostalgia for a more gracious and well-embellished era to something somewhat nastier—a parvenu old-tie, anti-liberal snobbism of the new, and young, far Right. But postmodern radicalism is an odd creature; its practitioners tend to be architectural monarchists, regardless of background or training, with the legendary preference for cake over bread.

The leader of the skyscraper division of this kind of postmodern eclecticism is acknowledged to be Philip Johnson, a man whose social and aesthetic credentials are impeccable and whose mercurial pursuit of a fast-moving avant-garde keeps the profession on its toes—or, at least, off balance—much of the time. His own work has moved from a sculptural abstraction to a picturesque eclecticism in which absolutely anything that can be copied or adapted goes, as long as it offers a constantly changing spectrum of sensations to an extraordinarily keen, responsive, and easily bored sensibility and mind.

The Johnson/Burgee firm, from which Johnson has recently officially retired (although he will continue to act as consultant), offers a wide choice in its skyscraper line: the notorious Chippendale model for AT&T in New York, which made the cover of *Time,* has been followed by medieval battlements in Lower Manhattan; a pinnacled mirror-Gothic highrise is nearing completion for PPG Industries in Pittsburgh; a curvilinear modernistic tower is rising aggressively in San Francisco; and an angled modernistic tower serves as Transco's headquarters in Houston, where Republicbank will be served by a gargantuan gingerbread guild hall.

Instead of cookie-cutter modern, we are getting cookie-jar monuments. All are eye-catching and mind-boggling, and all raise serious architectural issues, as is clearly the intention. But this work is no more than clever costume design or scenography; it is much too facile and empty to be called architecture at all. Even more curious than Philip Johnson's present production is the aesthetic opportunism of this early and ardent champion of the modern movement's revolutionary morality. These buildings embrace the kind of style that Le Corbusier condemned as "the feather on a woman's head" in *Vers Une Architecture,* the slim volume of 1923 that was a battle cry for a generation that hoped to change the world. If irony is what the postmodernists want, there is plenty of it around; not least are these immense, stand-up architectural jokes that have much more to do with fashion than with style, in which the joke is turned on the client and the rest of us. This is a high-building act that manipulates art, history, and the environment for very high stakes and a very dubious product.

Still another aspect of postmodernism is far less of a break with modernism than an extension of it—it might more correctly be called neo-modernism. Like neo-classicism, it reworks an established vocabulary. This trend emphasizes a geometric abstraction based on the aesthetics and details of early modernism; it manipulates these details with as much regard for sentiment as for abstraction, but even more significantly, its practitioners are moving the use of these elements to a handling and perception of space far beyond earlier modernist practice. The complex uses of transparency and reflection, an increasing ambiguity of open and closed elements, a layering of levels, combine for a

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conceptual and physical breakthrough with enormous aesthetic consequences. This can be seen and experienced in Richard Meier's carefully selected elements of the early modernist vocabulary, which advance that vocabulary through a new interpretation to a new kind of art. Similarly nostalgic references are used in a hard-edged and highly sophisticated way by Gwathmey-Siegel Associates. Among the most complex and virtuosic interpretations is the intensely individual, trend-setting work of the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki.

Interestingly enough, this development is less a continuous and natural evolution of modernism than the result of a younger generation's fascination with the formal elements of early modernism as it looks back at it as an historical phenomenon. They see its vintage components as a set of appealing forms and symbols that intrigue them far more than the messages those forms were originally meant to convey.

Perhaps what is most significant for architecture today is the fact that virtually everything is seen as history now—even that most recent event of the historical past, the modern movement. Distance has lent not only enchantment but also a totally changed vision and point of view. Until recently, the architecture of the twentieth century was conceived as something that existed only in, and of, the present, for the future. The new attitude turns its back on the present, and even on the immediate past, as if that aberrant revolution called modernism had never occurred. It is this abrupt change of position that is the most important, and radical, aspect of current philosophy and practice.

The fallacy of this attitude is the belief that something new can be created by rejecting those conditions and contributions that are necessary for the transformation of any art form. An even more basic fallacy is the idea that those elements can be rejected by choice, or at all. There is absolutely no way to purge today's building of the revolutions in thought, design, and technology that are intrinsic to the modern movement; they are embedded in the way buildings are constructed and used for contemporary life. Denouncing them will not remove them from either history or reality. The most impressive and valid developments in the architecture of the present moment are those that build on the unique achievements of the twentieth century rather than attempt to deny them; the best work is that which carries modernism to revealing and greatly enriched new dimensions. References to the past, or the incorporation of a new and more permissive architectural vocabulary, simply make the challenge, and the potential, greater.

There are hazards involved, however; the pursuit of what is essentially a formal approach can lead to some exquisite dead ends. The theoretical projects of Peter Eisenman, for example, have the precise and immutable elegance of mathematical equations whose intractable perfection is highly resistant to the realities of living. The challenge is building them as something more than abstractions; the danger is the suggestion that abstractions are enough. The formal fantasies of John Hejduk are pure poetic license, combining literary and aesthetic references in a haunting series of lyrical images. These exercises are often so uniquely beautiful, extraordinarily moving, and intellectually seductive that their execution is almost beside the point. Both represent exceptional talents, devoted to the exploration of the limits of architectural response. We do not live by buildings alone.

Neo-modernism is producing some of the finest construction of the 1980s. Cesar Pelli's glass-skinned skyscrapers carry Mies's glass towers to a more highly developed version of this consummate example of twentieth-century building technology. Unlike those who consider the curtain wall no more than the plain or fancy wrapper of packaged commercial space, Pelli sees it as a vehicle for expressive architectural detailing. Design solutions are better, he believes, when they are consistent with the way something is actually built, and those ideas that are common to a time, he feels, provide the best

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opportunities for art. Pelli consistently proves his case by designing some extraordinarily sensitive skyscraper skins. If he cannot make excessive size or bulk acceptable, he ameliorates it by turning oversized towers into objects of remarkable refinement and beauty. He divides, frames, and color-codes the thin, light, vitreous wall that is part of the modern technical miracle of skyscraper engineering; he treats it as a taut, enveloping membrane or as a smooth aggregate of discreetly designed panels and subtly graded parts. For the towers of New York's Battery Park City—which will be the city's most monumental building group—Pelli's skins are a graduated mix of masonry and mirror glass designed to recall and relate to the existing Manhattan conventions of street scale and architectural detail at their lower levels, while they become dazzling compositions above.

This is Sullivan "up-to-date," as Montgomery Schuyler would have put it. The finesse and expertise of Pelli's intricate, reflective expressions of use and context would have intrigued and pleased Schuyler. Since the 1960s these solutions have been increasingly liberated by changing architectural attitudes. But Pelli's considerable poetic art is still based on the facts of the case. In none of this work is structure ever divorced from style, as in so much of postmodernism; it is treated both as a generator of architectural form and as a source of architecturally self-sustaining elements to be explored, in turn, for their own formalist aesthetic. At the same time the solution never defaults on a meticulous and vigorous reference to an architectonic rationale.

The work of Foster Associates is another striking example of the aesthetics of structure. Technology is, in fact, Norman Foster's particular expressive tool: the sheer, illusory glass wall of the Willis Faber building in Ipswich, England, is a skillful play on the effects of reflection and dematerialization; the drama of the giant truss is celebrated in the Sainsbury Center; the braced wall theatrically defines a new skyscraper in Hong Kong. Building components are treated with jewel-like precision to become their own, polished end. The limited rules of modernism's use of technology are exploded for a much freer approach to design.

The current multiplicity of routes to a more expressive architecture is being called a pluralistic phenomenon, but it is only so in a superficial sense. There is less of a real diversity of styles than a diversity of means to the same end. No matter how dissimilar the source or the inspiration, all of the design elements employed are removed from their original context and purpose to exist on their own as discrete, independent forms, or as pure stylistic devices. This is true whether these elements are classical columns or industrial components. And it is this fact that unites and characterizes as a single aesthetic product the work of those engaged in today's stridently competitive dialectics, no matter how much they may divide and protest.

Some very talented architects seem to delight in inviting the dangers inherent in this approach. Helmut Jahn, of the Chicago firm of Murphy/Jahn, is pushing the frontiers of expression hard—moving from the sleek exploitation of building technology, which he does with almost sleight-of-hand ease, to an increasing interest in eclectic or abstract images. In his project for an addition to the Chicago Board of Trade, Jahn pays homage to Holabird and Root's original modernistic structure, combining cultural and technical references in a way that would have been impossible not too long ago. His drawing carries the eclectic image of the earlier building to a stunning, space-age romanticism. One of Jahn's latest projects, for a South African skyscraper, reaches a pinnacle of radical, sculptural abstraction. This design comes full circle by turning rational and modernist geometry into extreme romantic expressionism; Jahn has entered the realm of architecture for art's sake with a vengeance.

All of these buildings take enormous risks. Judgment of their success in terms of use, aesthetics, and environmental relationships will have to wait for their completion.

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But the new freedom that Jahn and others are utilizing has created an unparalleled opportunity and a moment of dramatic promise and challenge. The critical question, however, and the bottom line, is what kind of architecture is being produced. Unfortunately, there seems to be little interest in answering it. Either out of genuine enthusiasm or a need to be with, and of, the new in art, few commentators are analyzing or evaluating the results with much critical objectivity. This, also, is not new; the role of club member or camp follower has always been more attractive than being considered out of it or incapable of understanding the new vision and values. And as has happened with so much of the art of our time, architectural criticism is becoming a game in itself, with an increasingly inaccessible language and a growing detachment from the built object. The buildings can hardly be seen for the words. Publicity is more important than the product.

The modernists, in their own day, were equal offenders, of course, although the language employed was usually more righteous than silly or smart. A great deal of uninspired, extremely ordinary, and very bad building was praised or excused by those who professed to be critics because it followed the right—or the fashionable—rules. Apologists operated in the guise of analysts, and still do. Lessons that should have been learned early by astute observers were glossed over or ignored. This has finally caused the delayed backlash to modernism that is unfortunately sweeping good and bad into the same discard heap. And the same kind of over-publicized underachievement is being touted as trend-setting today.

It is hard not to see some of the most aggressively promoted examples of post-modernism, hailed widely as architectural breakthroughs, as surprisingly thin and inconsequential buildings. A do-it-yourself, kit-of-parts eclecticism turns the promise of revived grandeur into a paper-dollhouse architecture of plastic and plywood pilasters, and pediments, and sheet-rock cut-outs. There is too much that is too cute, pretending to be erudite or clever. Personal stylistic statements are preferred to optimum solutions.

The conflict between function and expression is not new either; this is a legitimate, historic condition of architecture, and the manner in which the necessary equilibrium is achieved is intrinsic to the quality of the result. But the trade-off today is increasingly unbalanced, and the "architectural celebration of the mixed metaphor," as the critic John Pastier has put it, is a distinctly mixed bag. "Although its aims of richness, esthetic freedom, symbolic meaning and historic reference are all laudable in the abstract," Pastier has written, "the concrete products of the post-modernist sensibility tend to be caricatures of old architecture or disingenuously superficial essays." The most generous evaluation of much of this work is to call it transitional, hoping that it will go where it is headed quickly. It is hard to take these architects as seriously as they take themselves.

What is significant, and disturbing, is the fact that the most questionable hallmarks of this particular kind of building are characteristic of much culture and the process that passes for education today. A narrow, narcissistic intelligence and sensibility, even among the exceptionally gifted, seeks easy effects and instant gratification in the naïve belief that shattering discoveries are being made. There is an exaggerated sense of uniqueness and an adolescent wit. Unexceptional personal preoccupations are offered as epochal creative advances; shallow observations are touted as profound, and small ironies are passed off as cosmic wisdom. This seems to be the intellectual distemper of our times.

But architecture is not trivia, and it is more than skin-deep. To give appropriate form to structure, plan, purpose, and place, and to do so with dignity and expressive content, is a good deal more than the fulfillment of a passing fancy. The art of building is the difficult act of design that turns physical needs and realities into an aesthetic experience of personal and universal value. The success or failure of a building is measurable

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by these constant factors that operate within any style, and that transcend it.

The special factors that control the design of the skyscraper have been investigated in a recently completed five-volume monograph called *The Planning and Design of Tall Buildings,* published by The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat of the American Society of Civil Engineers. This ambitious study deals with everything from philosophy to engineering stability. Inevitably the technology of the skyscraper is the most evident of these special features; height is primarily a function of technology. The engineering development of the tall building is one of the truly remarkable chapters in the history of architecture, and it has been well documented in the standard texts. Structure is what the tall building is about, even if this seems like belaboring the obvious; as its basic fact and most critical element, it is structure that is at the heart of the tall building's design. It becomes the architect's most powerful expressive tool, by the very nature of the constructive art.

But structural innovation and aesthetic preference can expand choices only as long as the real estate and investment numbers work out. Today's large commercial structures, like those that came before them, are essentially an economic formula. The modern office building has been standardized as a central service core surrounded by 15,000 to 25,000 square feet of space, or multiples of those figures. This standard has been set by business itself as the optimum working floor area for the large corporation. The tower shape is also dictated by the investor's belief that ground floor retail space is best concentrated for the largest possible captive working population that can be channeled through it each day. Even the tall building's almost uniform four- or five-foot design module has evolved out of another economic consideration, the minimum office size.

Since almost anything is possible technologically today—the architect designs and the engineer makes it stand up—even the basic structure is subject to economic determination. Within these market calculations the modern skyscraper is squeezed into the mold made by zoning laws and building codes. Ultimately, the design of the tall building is a product of investment economics and urban politics.

But there are other, less pragmatic factors that influence the decision to build tall, of which much is usually made. The desire to convey image, status, power, and prestige, to signal economic or cultural dominance, is universally acknowledged. Not least—although it is seldom discussed in the corridors of corporate or political power—is the architect's desire to create a museum-worthy object, usually against considerable odds; it is the artist's ego-play against the builder's. The drive for immortality, or at least for the accolades of the art establishment, is always present. There is, finally, in the words of The Council on Tall Buildings, the basic human desire "to build to the very limits of strength and knowledge . . . to achieve the limits of the achievable." This is the ultimate, eternal, and irresistible challenge.

The catalyst and unifying force for all of these conflicting concerns has been the search for style. The enormous rational and romantic diversity of skyscraper design makes this increasingly clear. It has not been the race for height that architects have cared about nearly as much as finding suitable and memorable ways to enclose the structure that makes that height possible. In an article that appeared almost forty years ago in *The Architectural Forum,* the editors made the telling observation that the structural principles of the tall building, developed by the turn of the century, have remained essentially unchanged. That fact, they noted with acerbic disapproval, "throws into harsh relief the vacillations of the facades."

Ah, those vacillating facades, shivering in the hard, cold light of structural reason and editorial censure. But if we look at those vacillations without prejudice or prejudgment, they tell us more about architecture than many people really want to know, or

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the experts find acceptable. The variety of those facades gives the lie to ideologues, who like their style straight, conforming neatly to the party line. The variety makes pluralism a fact, not just a passing fancy. The facades separate the artists from the hacks, the radicals from the conservatives, and the poets from the hired guns. They show us that the history of the skyscraper, which is also the history of this century—and which is like so much of that history—is a search for identity.

In the end, however, a building is only as good as its resolution of the complex structural, social, and symbolic factors involved. Style is the result of the architect's most concentrated and comprehensive efforts to resolve those often irreconcilable factors in an expressive synthesis at the level of art. But he has never had an easy job or a clearly defined role in dealing with the tall building. The choice has been between two conflicting courses. He could either proclaim his power, and his right, to turn the engineer's and the economist's calculations into an art form that carries the special freight of responsiveness to people and the environment, or he could disclaim any power to do anything about these controlling factors at all.

Most architects have opted for the first course; those who simply settled for being the developer's drafting arm have traditionally been scorned. But today attitudes toward skyscraper design are changing in a way that is profoundly disturbing. It has become fashionable for the architect to profess that he is unable to affect the basic building package. Many postmodernists prefer to consider the skyscraper just that—an enormous package that can be decorated for status, symbolism and style. This is done, as a rule, through a hierarchy of historical symbols, an elite checklist of aesthetic references. Released from any other concerns about the behemoth he is designing, the architect plays to the press and his peers. He is free to be erudite, nostalgic, or droll, and, if he can carry it off, fashionably outrageous. The layman may not always recognize the source, but it is clear that the architect is a very clever fellow. Whether this attitude toward design is a breakthrough or an abdication is open to serious debate. But to say that the skyscraper is no more than a package of standardized space to be gift-wrapped to the architect's or the client's taste is to make architecture less than an art or a profession.

There are some who believe that the skyscraper has reached the end of the line; that it has become too large, too frivolous, too destructive of people or places. Although it remains the most stunning architectural challenge of our time, one can no longer escape or deny the fact that the newest towers, larger and more impressive and more over-reaching than ever, are just as stunning exercises in the violation of cities. One cannot turn one's back on the fact that the skyscraper is being so patently and flagrantly abused, and is so abusive of everything around it.

Cities like New York, synonymous with the big building, encourage their own exploitation. In recent years, New York has been aiding and abetting more massive construction than that which sparked the horrified reaction that led to the original zoning restrictions of 1916. This unprecedented building size stems from the 1960 revision of the zoning law, which encouraged the tall tower surrounded by open space, an ideal that had long been the modernists' dream. A series of innovative bonuses and special permits were devised for the provision of public features such as plazas and arcades. This kind of incentive zoning, which had many admirable urbanistic objectives, including the preservation of theaters and neighborhoods, was skillfully manipulated by builders and their lawyers. Its subjective, permissive approach encouraged speculation, which led to inflated land values, which, in turn, required ever larger structures; this was followed by claims of economic hardship due to high land prices and requests for variances for still larger buildings. It was catch-22 at the highest exploitative level.

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Recent downzoning in midtown Manhattan has been aimed at correcting the most obvious abuses, but even with the cutbacks the buildings still allowed are bigger than those permitted by earlier laws. And the revisions often rely on a clever shuffle of sun and shadow criteria using calculations so complex that only a computer can deal with them. In a kind of fast-building monte, or architectural shell game, being played from New York's East to West Sides, the offending densities are shifted from one part of town to another, while residential neighborhoods, still over-zoned, remain open season for developers. The destructive aspects of this kind of zoning have no computer calculations, only human ones.

Do the arguments of economic development justify this degree of overbuilding? Is there a line where economic destiny can no longer be distinguished from pure greed? Is the famous skyline enough? At what point do the urban and cultural assets that are the city's great draw lose out to a painful and abrasive environment? At what moment does the city cross that line where it ceases to be magnificent and becomes unsupportable? Can a city invite its own decline?

Finally, how much, if any of this, must the architect answer for? New York's bumper crop of new skyscrapers vie with each other in the uniqueness of their design, as well as in their shattering scale. Other cities follow where New York leads in architectural excess. After many years of New York-watching, and many battles with developers dedicated to the lowest formula of commercial design, one must come to the reluctant conclusion that at this level of overbuilding and its attendant problems aesthetics cancel out. Architecture simply doesn't count.

As an observer and critic devoted to the quality of art and life, I never thought that I would make that statement. It is particularly ironic to have to make it now, in view of the fact that these blockbusters are among the best of the breed ever built in New York. With pitifully few exceptions in the past, New York's skyscrapers have never reached for anything but money. Many of these new buildings are the work of architects of reputation. But to anyone who believes that functions of density and amenity are germane to the art of architecture—that what buildings do is as critical as how they look—these structures make architecture unimportant and even meaningless. And the effete stylistic debates about them make architecture ludicrous. To judge these buildings in aesthetic terms is absurd.

In New York, the impact of these concentrated super-skyscrapers on street scale and sunlight, on the city's antiquated support systems, circulation, and infrastructure, on its already tenuous livability, overrides any aesthetic. As bulk and density increase, avenues darken and close in; shadows lengthen and downdrafts multiply; winter sun becomes a fleeting penetration of cold canyons at midday, leaving neither warmth nor cheer. The city's oppressive impersonality increases, while services suffer and civility diminishes; amenities disappear or are traded off for questionable substitutes. Architecture, in this context, is only a game architects play. Art becomes worthless in a city brutalized by overdevelopment.

The last to know, or admit this, are the architects themselves. They are offering us a select-a-style skyline, as if that were the only thing that mattered. They keep company with city officials who see nothing but the beauties of the tax base and lawyers devoted to the aesthetics of the legal loophole. Developers are congenitally incapable of thinking of anything except the art of maximized profit; it is only New York's boom-and-bust construction cycles that have traditionally kept them from destroying both the goose and the golden egg.

Meanwhile, the architects are having a wonderful time re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Some, of course, are building these behemoths, and others are composing panegyrics to the latest fashion in historical allusionism, as they previously composed them to the most recent technological innovation. Pick your rationale; it really doesn't matter for these cash-flow monuments.

The evidence is overwhelming in the

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rebuilding of Madison Avenue between Fiftieth and Sixtieth Streets, where an appalling concentration of new super-skyscrapers makes pre-1916 Wall Street and post-World War II midtown look picturesque. It also makes the city's zoning look like a bad joke. This is exactly the kind of construction, with its deleterious side effects, that zoning was devised to prevent, and the realization of what the New York zoning has wrought is the motivation for the recent midtown revisions.

Philip Johnson is right when he says that the controversial pediment-top of his AT&T Building between Fifty-fifth and Fifty-sixth Streets is unimportant; what counts is the way the structure's enormous bulk and pretentious, overblown detail have finally shaped up as a heavy-handed assault on the avenue. This building cannot even be seen by the person on the street below it, short of his lying down in a hole bored in the base of a building across the way. Its block-long, crushing descent to the sidewalk is relentlessly brutal; not only does its size flout the urban and civic intent of restrictive zoning, but its siting fails utterly to provide the sight lines essential to a work of architecture. This fact is not redeemed by an imperial colonnade at ground level or by oversized oculi that make the understanding of the subtle and powerful uses of the void in a solid wall of Renaissance and classical masters all too clear by contrast. These are just big holes.

The necessary metamorphosis of borrowed, mannerist parts into a convincing whole never takes place; even at this scale the facade between pediment and arcade is dull and ordinary; this skyscraper thuds rather than soars. The postmodernist historical references add up to a kind of architectural malapropism at drop-dead scale. Now in all-too-solid stone and steel, the building has even lost its original, anti-modernist shock value. It has turned out to be ponderously pedestrian.

The IBM Building on the next block, between Fifty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Streets, by Edward L. Barnes and Associates, is built to the same preposterous scale. But here the architect has attempted to accommodate the impossible and the undesirable with notable skill, something that gives Barnes the dubious distinction of at least trying to do the wrong thing right. IBM's taut, refined skin of granite and glass upstages AT&T like a suave fashion model next to a fussy dowager in a homemade dress. The extravagantly cantilevered corner that frees the sidewalk and the diagonal slice that reveals the sky and slims the building's huge bulk afford some *trompe l'oeil* relief from its overwhelming mass.

The difference in the two buildings—IBM is by far the better one—is the demonstrable way in which the design process gives meaning to idea and purpose. AT&T's ideas are as thin as its borrowed symbols are large; this super-pastiche relates to nothing except its own overbearing aspirations. Although IBM is plainer, it is richer in its concern with urban relationships and its immediate world; it sets up tensions and responses of far greater architectural inferences and rewards. The choice of a modernist or postmodernist vocabulary is quite beside the point; what matters is making architecture out of it, and whether architecture applies here at all.

One block west, Der Scutt has created the gigantic Trump Tower, a soaring, faceted form that is also guaranteed to destroy the scale and ambience of Fifth Avenue. This dubious achievement has already been demonstrated by Olympic Tower, one of the first structures to zap the avenue by taking advantage of the massive zoning packages that could be put together by an astute builder. Trump Tower might be an interesting design somewhere else; here it is totally out of place. Its destructive effect on Fifth Avenue's cool, limestone tradition will be magnified by bronze mirror glass. Fifth Avenue's worldly elegance is beautifully epitomized by that earlier Fifth Avenue skyscraper complex, Rockefeller Center. Trump and his architect should have looked south.

What all of these oversized buildings in close proximity will contribute to density and gridlock is anyone's guess. But their

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damage to the city's comfort and character, their threat to its convenience, mobility, and existential pleasures, is already apparent. The zoning trade-off for so much increased bulk and height is the windswept plaza and the public passageway; some add to the city, some do not. These spaces occasionally ameliorate the disadvantages of high density, but they never justify it; they range from the highly debatable asset of a fancier building lobby, a few of which really offer pleasant places to sit, to generously landscaped street plazas. IBM's space-frame enclosure and promised planting could be the optimum example of the latter, but the tubing of the frame has turned out to be heavy and gross; the lacy delicacy suggested by earlier models and renderings is lacking in execution. And with AT&T looming across the street, the carefully chosen trees may never see the sun. The zoning "trade-offs" have become their own reward. The balance between the mandated amenity and sanctioned overbuilding operates with the kind of grotesque logic with which compromises of public purpose are lobbied through the urban political shoals.

Admittedly, the tall building works dramatically well for business and its satellite services; to deny this fact and its corollary, that the development of the skyscraper has logically served these characteristically twentieth-century needs, is to miss the real nature of our civilization and of the most conspicuous architecture of our time. The validity of the symbolism of the tall building for its age is intrinsic to its powerful imagery. What is lacking is a realistic understanding of, or even more important, a proper concern for the physical connections and limitations of a built environment on this scale. Architectural concentrations of such size require a proper municipal infrastructure and support services, including adequate transportation; they also need the kind of practical and conceptual planning that is very much out of fashion right now. And while today's tolerance of incremental change and variety is a desirable and necessary urban insight—modernism's blindness on this score is one of its most vulnerable points—the current trendy ad-hoc-ism is not enough. There is no benign contextualism in the development world; there is only aggressive and exploitative change.

As for the stylistic changes with which everyone is so intrigued today, Montgomery Schuyler's observation of 1899 is still valid. "It all depends," he wrote, "on whether the departure is a mere caprice of the designer, or an attempt to come closer to reason and reality." Today's architecture is moving dangerously close to mere caprice. But the design process is also becoming much more diverse and open, with all that that implies of creativity and abuse. Today there are equal opportunities for poetic license and architectural malpractice. With this new freedom, the possibilities for good and bad building are as spectacular as some of the new structures.

But the need for evaluation is also greater than ever; never has the role of the critic been more important. And never have Schuyler's "reason and reality" been in shorter supply. Significant architectural change, those real revolutions of perception and practice that are highpoints of human experience—and that are the real sources of style—are being subverted by a public and profession more addicted to publicity and novelty than to reason and reality. A lot of fashionable intellectual underbrush that needs clearing out is hopelessly confusing the rational priorities of a utilitarian structural art.

In the meantime, our old cities are savage and deteriorating, and our new cities are ignoring the lessons of the past and the needs of the future, even as familiar problems begin to sabotage their brief, utopian image. While this urban script is played out, the search for the ultimate skyscraper goes on. The fact that the focus and objective of the search are narrowing as the size and impact of these buildings increase to record new levels is a serious cause for unease—for cities and for architecture alike. At worst, overbuilding will make urban life unbearable. At best, we will go out in a blaze of style.

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"The Free Love Corner"

by Martin Seymour-Smith

The place where I was living in 1929," Robert Graves told an acquaintance in a skittish letter of the late Fifties, "was known as Free Love Corner." But there wasn't much *love* (in any of that word's normally accepted senses) in evidence in the situation that began to develop in the vicinity of 19A St. Peter's Square in spring 1929; and no freedom at all.

The affair, once notorious, is not completely explicable. It is unlikely that it could be, for it involves such enigmatic, trivial, and diverse factors as a relationship thought of by the participants as "the Four," an almost fatal descent from a fourth-story window, another dangerous one from a third, the question of whose books really belong to whom, the break-up of a marriage, the issue of a writ, the rejection of England as a dwelling-place—and a unique mixture of anguish and farce. The emotion attending the matter was so intense and the hubris of one party so extreme that it never did make complete sense, although Laura Riding has seemed to insist on making much of it ever since.

Graves and Riding had first met in person on January 2, 1926. Both he and his wife Nancy had admired one of her poems published in the magazine of the Fugitive Movement, *The Fugitive*; at the instigation of John Crowe Ransom, the leading poet of the group and an admirer of the work of the young Graves, Riding had sent a sheaf of poems to Graves from which to make a selection for possible English publication. She was at that time married to a history professor named Louis Gottschalk (not to be confused with the neglected composer); they were soon divorced on grounds of what he later called "sheer incompatibility."

Graves issued an invitation to her to join Nancy and their four children at Islip, the village near Oxford where they lived. But the correspondence lapsed. Riding had an affair with Allen Tate, one of the younger members of the Fugitive Movement, which had unfortunate consequences and almost destroyed her.

Then, out of the blue, just a few days before the Graves family was setting off for Cairo, at whose university Graves had agreed to teach (it was the only job he ever had and it lasted for four months), a cable came from Riding to the effect that she was arriving in England. When Graves first saw her at Waterloo Station, he turned to his then father-in-law, the painter William Nicholson, and exclaimed: "My God! What am I going to do?" This difficult question took thirty years to answer.

Riding sailed with the Graves family to Cairo and returned with them to Islip after Graves had tendered his resignation. By this time Graves, who knew by God what he was going to do but was assailed by moral doubt (he once advised me: "Always go by first impressions: I wish I had"), had formed a spiritual liaison with Riding of great intensity. From the beginning she defined it,

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since the definition of everything (including other people's states of mind and their duties toward each other and toward her) was her *raison d'être,* as the Fugitives had discovered to their dismay when she tried to take over their entire movement. But Graves was ready to be taken over: he had been waiting to be for years.

Soon Robert and Laura moved from Islip —the children were distracting—to a London flat near Ladbroke Grove. Nancy, who had not been happy with Robert since their marriage, and who had herself fallen under Laura's spell, fully acquiesced in this arrangement. Now the two partners became lovers; but they were also collaborating on a book, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry,* and on other projects, including the reformation of Robert's character. What was not reformed, however, was his innate desire for someone like Laura.

Soon after, they went to Vienna to finish their book. Graves's excessively moralistic parents were horrified, but were assured by Nancy that they had her full blessing; and Graves untruthfully insisted that the union was on a non-physical level. Graves's once sprightly Irish poet-father, by now thoroughly subdued by his fiercely righteous wife (once, when someone left some sandwiches behind, she sent them on), was taken in to the extent that he believed in his son's assertion to the effect that a "wonderful Trinity" of friendship existed between Robert, Nancy, and Laura—and he recorded it in his diary. And so, such mundane things as physicality apart, it did. The definition had come from Laura, who defined all matters not as if she were God, or God's messenger, but as if she were something rather mysterious that lay somewhere above the two. But her position in relation to God is one thing that she has never satisfactorily been able to define.

When, in 1927, Graves and Riding returned from Vienna the situation developed into an open *ménage à trois*: Graves and Riding took a two-part, four-story flat in St. Peter's Square, Hammersmith; for Nancy and the children Graves rented a houseboat, a barge called the *Ringrose,* which lay moored nearby. He spent some time there but lived with Riding in the flat (in whose name it was, though he paid the rent). From there they founded the Seizin Press, whose first publication was a large hand-printed volume of Laura's poems. (They also published a fragment by Gertrude Stein that she had left over from a year or two back.) The purpose of the Press was unique: "to print necessary books by various particular people." This was the first public expression of Riding's "supra-individual," "anti-temporal" project: since she saw poetry as the only true reality, a form of words independent of time, it radiated that "sense of life so real that it becomes the sense of something more real than life." But the only poetry that accomplished this, she insisted, was her own: she "lessoned" (her word) everyone else in how to achieve this reality. The number of Graves's friends began to drop off; Riding was over-intense and could never understand that it was natural to others—less cosmically well-informed—to possess their own points of view. Graves's friend Jack Lindsay, a novelist and publisher, found Riding "disagreeably self-centered . . . with a hard discontented face . . . . She slept in a definite line of orientation, east-west I think, [and] had a number of similarly stern ideas."

Laura Riding had accomplished a good deal for herself in the six short months since she had left America. She had left in a state of physical and mental demoralization. She had now taken over the Graves-Nicholson enterprise, which was functioning better than it had ever done before as a wonderful Trinity, and a decently Nicaean one at that. And Graves had found what he needed. In place of Nancy's milk-and-water feminism, mannered rather than powerful, he had someone who was asking:

> when will man grow up . . . become woman, when will she (woman) have companions instead of children?

This question Laura asked in "The Damned Thing," included in *Anarchism Is Not Enough.*

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Neither Graves nor she desired to undergo a sex change; that was not what she meant at the time. What she meant was that she would initiate a program for the education of men—starting with Graves. In 1929 the program involved expanding the wonderful Trinity by one member.

Not much is now remembered about Geoffrey Phibbs, the fourth participant. He changed his name to Geoffrey Taylor when his father refused to allow his mistress into his house in 1930. His least obscure book, an anthology called *Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century,* was published in 1951 under his name. He died just after. He also published a book on Irish gardens in the same year. In the only reference book to list him (he was cut out of a subsequent edition of it), he is described as an "entomologist." A relation of his by marriage (a lecturer in ethics) described him in later life as being pleasantly eccentric and possessed of "zoological quirks."

Phibbs was born in 1900 in Norfolk. Soon after his birth his parents (his father was an Anglo-Irish landowner) moved to Ireland. In the Twenties they were living in Lisheen, Sligo. A collection of verse composed before he met Graves and Riding has the astonishing title of *The Withering of the Figleaf*; it was published in 1928. He had married, in the mid-Twenties, a woman called Norah, an artist; in 1929 he was still married to her, though in what can best be described as a state of interrupted separation—she was living intermittently with David Garnett, the novelist and man of letters. This finally ended in divorce, and in 1933 he married one who was allegedly—the words are those of a shrewish woman of the Graves family who knew him—"some courageous young woman who seems to like men of low moral character." His friend Frank O'Connor was fascinated by him, but thought him "demonic." He was unstable, vengeful, and had only an iota of talent and application.

The wonderful Trinity had heard of Geoffrey Phibbs before New Year 1929. Like Graves, he had written to Riding about her work. He visited them in October 1928. A letter from Phibbs, to Graves, written from "The Bungalow, Wicklow, Ireland" and dated "Oct: 1928," reads (I have taken no liberties with Phibbs's orthography in anything I quote from him):

> Dear Robert,
> What you said yesterday about Jocasta ought to have been and was valuable, but it made me so bluddy nervous that wherever I spoke afterwards I think I put things wrong. Which in the circumstances was a pitty. God knows meaning is hard enough anyway, being the most unblessed Trinity. And one has only an idea that the idea at the other side ["end" is deleted, "side" substituted] of the words is the same. Laura Ridings work has been getting more important for me thru the last 6 months. At present it is more important than anything else is. Naturally the important thing for me is that it is important. But it is also important for me in a different way, and perhaps less, that anyone I like, not counting work, should not think me wrong-headed & be annoyed. Because it is annoying to the edge of suicide to be admired by wrong-headed people. It would be fair of her to make allowances for the amount one has to shed, as you said, before one reaches her entire position. She may be a dragons tooth but I'm not. If you hear of a job in England will you let me know. Don't trouble about it but let me know. I'm tired of dissembling in Ireland. Don't bother answering this note.
> Geoffrey Phibbs.

Whenever Phibbs spoke, or wrote, in the ensuing months he "put things wrong"—almost as if under some spell. But he did put an anticipatory finger on a future event when he wrote that to be "admired by wrong-headed people" would be "annoying to the edge of suicide." The letter is not that of an especially articulate man—even allowing for "bluddy" nervousness—whereas Riding was making the matter of being articulate, to the point of absolute precision, her life's business.

Nonetheless, her hopes were fired. So

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Graves was sent off in late 1928 to find out about, and possibly to recruit, this admirer. Briefed by Riding, Graves told him that in order to understand and "reach" Laura he would need to "shed" a great deal, to change. Graves carried out his task conscientiously, but felt unhappy about forcing himself to conceal the contempt he could not help feeling for Phibbs as soon as he met him. But he indulged in his best hopes and wishes, as unfortunately he always does, and did his best.

Phibbs was tall and thin, with a lock of hair which he kept jerking back. He was "very black-looking," according to Graves. His eyes were blue, but seemed dark. He was always "looking down as if intensely preoccupied with something that [had] just happened to him." When he came out of his brown study, it was "always suddenly and questioningly—placing the burden of conversation on the other person." In a number of Riding's post-1929 works he became—to the point of monotony—a synonym of the "devil." His appearance reminded Frank O'Connor of Proust's Baron de Charlus. O'Connor describes him in his autobiography, *My Father's Son,* as "satanic and cruel," but with an "animal beauty."

Phibbs had already read Riding's poems; but her two prose books of 1928, *Contemporaries and Snobs* and *Anarchism is Not Enough,* were what set him off. He had difficulties with his family, was unhappy about the flippancy of his verse, disliked his journalistic work, and felt that he ought to be doing something better. He had spiritual yearnings, but of a singularly ill-defined sort. He was tired of "being treated as an irresponsible young wit" in Ireland. The essence of his considerable charm lay in his wistfulness for the better life he knew he could not attain. When, later, he sank to his proper level, he seemed no more than odd. But in 1929 someone or something put madness into him. He was in a state of emotional lability bordering at times on madness.

So Phibbs gave up his journalist's job in Ireland, settled some of his debts there, and decided to throw in his lot with Laura Riding—and with the Seizin Press and its objectives, which he soon found he did not understand. This lack of understanding made him angry and dangerous.

He turned up with a knapsack and in rags —or, at least, in clothes which Laura Riding disapproved of and consequently "eliminated." He had £6, given him by his parents. According to a "Précis"[1] Graves drew up later under threat of a lawsuit from Phibbs, Graves was prevailed upon to "lend" him

> 7 shirts, 2 jerseys, a brown coat, a silk dressing gown, underclothes, socks and four or five neckerchiefs—value £7. Miss Riding also lent him an 18th century blue tie pin value £1, a batik silk scarf, value £2 and two other silk scarves value £1.

There is no record of his trousers, and we must assume that these were not found wanting. Phibbs—having been lent a further £17 by Riding for clothes (of her choice: she wished to see his spiritual virtues as well represented as possible)—was now presentable, and it was not long before he and Laura Riding, or rather Laura Riding and he, were contemplating the composition of a modest "philosophical work." This was to deal with "knowledge of good and evil," but nothing more extensive.

Other women fall in love and hardly know what they are doing. But Riding fell in love, thought she knew what she was doing, and entered into a collaboration on things that most people would think irrelevant to love's vernal stirrings. As is her wont, she wanted to "tidy up" Phibbs—which is only another way of saying that, if he wanted to reach her "entire position," he would have to "shed" a great deal of himself, as well as most of his clothes. Serious work on so basic a project as the knowledge of good and evil would doubtless have tidied anyone up—and everyone else as well, had it been successful. But it never got written. Composition was inter-

1 This "Précis" is the source of the firsthand account I quote from hereafter, unless stated otherwise.

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rupted by events possibly definable (though we shall never know) as at least silly.

Riding, having dressed Phibbs for his part, became even more intensely interested in him; and so for Graves the situation became only moderately "wonderful"—though he made the best of it. Riding's goal has always been "finality": end of history, end of the tyranny of time, annihilation of matter. Graves persuaded himself that in some way the Irish Adonis, and Laura's fascination with him, must be landmarks on the route: eyes front, quick march, he dedicated himself to finality and Phibbs.

Phibbs had closed his Irish bank account but had not opened one in England. He had nothing to put into any account. He was forever dithering about his wife, and was unable to commit himself wholly to the knowledge of good and evil, though he did make some (mostly unpreserved) notes on the subject. His vacillations caused irritation, but he was more often than not able to smooth things over by his gift for making moving declarations of intent—and by his effective expression of fine sentiments of repentance, which came from him as from a tape-loop.

Graves's family, and many of his friends, felt, more straightforwardly, that (as Graves's brother John put it to me) "Laura wanted Phibbs." While this does not do justice to the tragic intensity with which she yearned for others to fit into her scheme, or to the absoluteness of her conviction that what she saw as the road to truth was the same for all, it does have a crude aptness. Riding earnestly "wanted" everyone, including Robert and Nancy; but just as some people are born more equal than others, so in late February of 1929 she found herself wanting Geoffrey Phibbs more urgently than she wanted Robert and Nancy, who were in any case already "hers." *How* she wanted him is obscure, because it was obscure (or just physically disturbing?) to her. Her customary precision failed her, which is why she raised a furor. Some kind of constitutional *Verrücktheit,* perhaps, supervened. Having spent two years during which Truth had not been opposed except by the correctable errors of two others, she found herself confronted by awkward and wicked bits of Untruth, by irrelevant, "time-bound" bits of history, such as Phibbs's irritating preoccupation with his wife Norah, and his intellectual doubts. These stood in the way of Truth; and suddenly no one, least of all she, could understand in what direction she wanted to go. Phibbs in exactly her own likeness would have been night (if not daylight) robbery: she decided to make Phibbs "happy" by doing to him what she had initially done to his clothes: throw him away and make him into a new man. But he was no Graves.

The partners began to teach Phibbs printing, and one of the many early Seizin prospectuses lists a projected short work by him. But the main emphasis was on the "philosophical work," in which he would collaborate with Riding. In other words, Graves found himself, not for the last time, supplanted as Laura's collaborator—and in other respects—by a man whose intellect he despised.

But Graves swallowed his feelings and

> bought a house-boat [*Avoca*] moored alongside the other [*Ringrose*] as a residence for Mr. Phibbs and also repaired it at his own expense.

All this plunged Phibbs into a state of extreme confusion. He thought he loved Laura, and was dutifully told how to do so by Graves; but he still did not feel that Riding was being "fair" "about the amount one has to shed to reach her entire position." He felt, desperately, that it was a "pitty"; good and evil, subjects he was supposed to be researching, made him "bluddy nervous." So did Laura. He found himself under pressure to behave properly from Graves, always officious and ferociously military when undertaking Riding's commissions. He was confused the more when Graves, seeming to change tack, would weep on his shoulder about the difficulties of his own position. Graves had needed such shoulders for some time; he must talk incessantly about his love problems. The purpose of such talk is talk; it

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is to no purpose, and he never takes note of any advice proffered.

Phibbs's wife Norah had just left "little David Garnett" (as Graves had called him in *The Marmosite's Miscellany*); she wanted her husband back, and Frank O'Connor was putting pressure on him to return to her. But as O'Connor says, Phibbs was very angry with her. So the Four developed in place of the Trinity. But Phibbs was as uneasy a fourth person as a theologian would be if obliged to accommodate a hitherto unknown divine brother of Christ into the old arrangement. The theory underlying the Four is a work by Riding, the sketch for which has been lost in the fogs of time. It lasted only some six weeks—if we allow two for the articulation of its revelation in her mind.

One afternoon—a puzzled man, bedazzled by Riding's theories, guilty about his failure to satisfy—Phibbs sat down with a pencil to try to work out his own (unentire) position. The result could hardly have been enlightening, even to him; but it is instructive as to the sort of thinking induced in people by Riding. (The initials speak for themselves; > is the mathematical sign for "is larger than.")

Numbers involve an undefined disintegration.
R = L>N>R
L = G>R>N>L
L = N>G
N = G>L>R
Disorder is necessary primary to order (1 to 17)
Theoretical is point of transmutation of actual from temporal
Actual = formal = potential = geometrical
Temporal *may* = historical, ("actual historical" or "potential")
? a projection from Laura
? necessitated *by* Laura
? defined (limited by Laura (conditioned—what term?) (Not yet known)
? of myself (not yet known)

It is easy to laugh at Phibbs but impossible not to feel sorry for him as, dressed up in one of Robert's green shirts, prettily enscarfed (even if still in his own trousers), his lock hanging over his forehead, he labored under the rays of Riding's severe efforts to transmute him. It has always been difficult to find yourself in 17 + 1, or 18, or at the exact point at which to transmute from temporal, or whatever. Disorder certainly always = 1. He tried to persuade Laura to run off with him: immediately. But since there was no money to run off on, and doubtless for other reasons, she refused.

II

And so, on All Fools' Day, he vanished; he "suddenly disappeared," having told "his friends at the houseboats at Atlanta Wharf that he was dining with an aunt. No news of him could be got." Poor Phibbs, distracted, was trying to throw up 1 to 17 and find his wife. But fate had other things in store for him: "? of myself (not yet known)."

He had by this time received two letters from O'Connor on the subject of Norah. From one of them it seems that his actions had not been wholly unplanned, since O'Connor (who then "loved" him and Norah "most in the world") mentions that he hopes to see him in France at Easter (which fell, in 1929, on March 31.) O'Connor told him that for a week it had been "touch and go" with "Norah's reason," that Phibbs had sacrificed "the finest woman in Ireland" (Laura made much comic play with this phrase in her feeble *roman à clef, 14A*), but that he admired Geoffrey for his state of "temporary insanity." However, "if I take off my hat to you I take off my head to her [Norah]"—another phrase lifted by Laura for use in *14A*. Geoffrey got off lightly, though, because he would always roast himself, "and like Goethe I [O'Connor] have always loved that which seeks a death of flame."

Phibbs did not lie when he told his friends that he was dining with an aunt. Having no cash, and in no position to borrow any from the three friends from whom he proposed to flee (though Graves, left to himself, would have paid him all he had to disappear forever), he did go to the aunt—who lived in

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London—to get some. But he probably did not have time for dinner; he had another destination.

Very well, Riding thought to herself, Geoffrey had bolted. This was a serious mistake—but correctable. It might serve to persuade him, once and for all, which of the many causeways open to him was the heavenly one. He must be found. She had obedient assistants.

Things happened very fast from the moment of Phibbs's flight. Both Graves and Nancy were set to work by Laura to find him. As soon as Phibbs first arrived and the Four had been created, Graves had found himself being pushed, by Riding, back into Nancy's arms—this is after all one convenient way to transmute a Trinity into a Quadrilateral. But Nancy did not want Robert back in her arms. And Graves certainly wanted to be back in Riding's. He had written, some eight years earlier, of Richard Roe, who, cuckolded by "one John Doe," wished himself "Job, Solomon, Alexander"

> For cunning, patience, power to overthrow
> His tyrant, but with heart gone so far rotten
> That most of all he wished himself John Doe.

There was one rotten-hearted sense in which he did wish himself Phibbs—but not Phibbs-in-flight. But he kept his own counsel, and, as he put it a few months later in the deliberately cryptic "Dedicatory Epilogue to Laura Riding" with which he concluded the first version of his celebrated autobiography, *Goodbye to All That,* found that "he must suddenly hurry off to Ireland." Riding sent him off to Sligo to seek out his own intempestive, demented rival. And he was of course grateful to her for her refusal to leave him and Nancy.

These were strange circumstances, and stranger still to a poet whose mind had not long recovered from the horrors of war. He found himself "on the very boat, from Fishguard, that had been my hospital-boat twelve years before," and at Limerick he saw a woman who seemed to him

> Old Ireland herself sitting black-shawled and mourning on the station-bench and telling of the Fall.

But Robert did not find Phibbs in Sligo, only two distracted parents who had no more idea than he of their son's whereabouts. He returned to Hammersmith as soon as he could. Norman Cameron, a friend of Graves's, suggested that Phibbs had gone off to Rouen, after his wife Norah. The three immediately set off there, via Dieppe.

They "found him there with his wife from whom he had previously separated. He did not appear to recognize the friends. His whole behavior was very strange." But perhaps he did not *want* to recognize the friends. They were unable to talk to him; he avoided them. On a hilltop in Rouen Laura "seemed to die," Graves wrote, "as I had seemed to die thirteen years before."

At Rouen station Laura wrote Phibbs a letter. They then returned. For Riding, the loss of him was high tragedy. She was not going to give him up without a battle—his flight had suddenly clarified his immense value to her.

III

When the Trinity, or Rump of the Four, or whatever, returned from France, they found a letter from Phibbs to Laura awaiting them. It was undated and had no return address—but it had been written and posted in Rouen. This letter, which crossed hers to Phibbs, threw light on the reasons for his departure—and got Graves into hot water with Riding, whose state of mind seems to have been fast approaching that of the Jehovah of old when his chosen people persistently failed to carry out his will and set up false idols. Phibbs, hoping to achieve his, if not her, sort of "finality," wrote this letter:

> Laura
> This is to be said. I have gone away for two reasons. Last Monday whilst you were talking to Nancy in the Ringrose I talked to Robert at

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the Barge [the *Avoca*]. He told me, what I knew, that the only life he could have with you was when I was away. He would never have agreed to my going away even for some time. But it seemed to me then that I must go some time. Then as you know I went to dinner with my aunt. She gave me very bad news of Norah. That she was very ill and was making herself worse because of me. So when I had left my aunts I decided to go to Norah then. You must I suppose wonder that I could think of any one before you. It seemed to me that you are very strong and that you have Robert. I was between you and Robert in some way that he nor I understood. Norah simply had no one. So I did what I did and am terribly terribly unhappy. Unless you and i meet accidentally we shan't meet at present and that is not likely. You know that I know you for the most important thinker and all . . . .

Riding severely blamed Robert for not holding on to Phibbs more firmly, for telling him of his own needs, for not preserving the Four.

In the days preceding Phibbs's departure things had been boiling up to crisis point. While Graves was betraying the Four in the *Avoca,* by admitting to what *he* would like, Riding (possibly planning to accede to Phibbs's request by reconciling the other two) was lecturing Nancy on the subject of her attitude to Robert: she was breaking the spirit of the Four by not being more loving toward him. Soon Graves, too, would have to be shown that he had been mistaken in his inclinations. For the sake of truth, or Truth, Riding must "have" Phibbs.

From Lisheen, Sligo, Phibbs, now reunited with his wife, wrote to Graves on April 10:

Robert,
Will you send me
1. Laura's letters to me.
2. The copy of Love as Love [*Love as Love, Death as Death*: her poems published in 1928 by Seizin] which she wrote my name in.
3. My own manuscripts & papers.

The Love as Love was in the book-case. My MSS. were some in the drawer and some were on the end of the table in the work room in a folder and on the small block. I'd like, too, the scarf Laura gave me. If you feel it would make things in a way cleaner to burn all my papers and poems please do. I don't much mind about them. Laura's letters I do want very much, but I think she may not wish me to have them, but more probably she won't mind if I have them or not.

Tell her, if you think it worth while, that I accept her letter to me absolutely (the one from Rouen Station) and that I will try to do as she asked me about being silent. If it is any satisfaction to her you can tell her that I have not been happy for one minute since I left her on the Ringrose. I carry her Rouen letter with me as my most complete humiliation and I have come back to Ireland out of humiliation. God I feel bitter. Sorry. This letter is bloody. It just shews that I'm all Laura said I was.

God bless you. Tell Nancy I love her. But not furiously as I love Laura. I know all about Judas. I'll write his Gospel. Hell. I don't really care about those things, but send them if you can.

I'll never see the end of my own futility.
Nor of why.

Geoffrey.

He wrote this on a Wednesday. By Sunday, April 14—indeed, on the day before that—he had changed his mind, for he wrote again, in a different tone, this time to Nancy. Obviously these two had been forming an understanding, on the lines of "let's leave the two mystics to change the world while I write books and you paint." He felt besieged by a bewildering array of women: Laura, Norah, and Nancy herself.

Nancy,
Yesterday I had ready to send you 5 pages of writing & a page cut out of the Encyclopaedia Britannica [this was from the 1910 edition, pages 607-8—on one leaf—which contains the "General Paralysis of the Insane" section of the entry on "Insanity"]. Then just when I was going to send the letter to you, came without expectation, Laura's letter to me. I had written

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> to you a lot about Laura, her work, her brain, her health, but all supposing the letter to me from Rouen station as her finality to me. Now her letter makes everything not final. I have torn up the letter I wrote you yesterday and stuck back the page in the Encyclopaedia. Now I am bewildered—what was final is not final. I could go to Laura & you and live such a life as I want to live because it is a good life. I could do that but how can I? Norah has come here—she would not stay away from me. I have no love for her like my love for Laura ["you" is very heavily, but not heavily enough, deleted, and "Laura" substituted]. When I left Laura & you I ought never to have gone back to her. But I did go back. And now I cannot see Norah as bad just because she is devoted to me & wants to be with me: it is a great trouble. Also she is ill: the Doctor says her lungs are all right, but that she must have absolute rest and peace. I do not see that it would be right for me to leave her again now. I do not see it as right that I should stay away from Laura. I *want* to go to Laura, but because of that I mistrust the arguments I could give for going. Will you say something? When does Laura go to Paris, if?
> I love you
>
> Geoffrey

Graves was not the only one during this April to see Sligo. Nancy was by no means unwilling to be sent to Ireland, as Laura's envoy, to retrieve Phibbs. She was tactful and (possibly) ingratiating toward him. She persuaded Phibbs to promise to return to Hammersmith; she also succeeded in getting Norah to return to France.

But Phibbs broke his promise. He sent a wire on April 22: "Can't get away before Thursday." When the time came he did not turn up. Riding became frantic. On Friday, April 26, a wire came from Hilton, Huntingdonshire, the very place where Graves had met Nancy. It was by then the residence of David Garnett. Phibbs had presumably gone to see him, to discuss Norah. Garnett (who himself kept a wife, Rae) received him with studied distaste. But Phibbs was still reluctant, and wired:

> Difficulties innumerable insuperable too great no faith this is is is end not coming

Laura instructed Graves to go to Hilton on the instant. But that was not so easy; it was too late to get there and bring him back that night, but she wanted him back that night.

Graves hired a special train—a practice not then as uncommon or expensive as it is now. In the epilogue to the first *Goodbye to All That* he simply records:

> my sudden journey to Hilton in Huntingdon, to a farm with memories of her [Nancy] as I first knew her, to burst in upon—as it happened—David Garnett (whom I had never met before), gulping his vintage port and scandalising him with my soldier's oaths as I denied him a speaking part in your parable . . . .

Garnett, whose own autobiography, perhaps understandably, does not mention this episode, was unhelpful. Graves swore roughly at him. Then he rousted out the exhausted Phibbs and took him back to London on the waiting special train. Phibbs pleaded that he had "lost faith" in the "philosophical work"; but he was frightened for his physical safety, for Graves looked and now was on the verge of extreme rage.

IV

They arrived back at 35A very late.

> The four talked nearly all night trying to help him [Phibbs] to come to a clear decision, his reasons for staying away being uncertain and contradictory.

Riding tried to get him to stay. But Phibbs was adamant: he did not want any part of Laura Riding; he could not be happy with her or make her happy. Everyone went to bed for an hour or two. But by eight o'clock on the morning of Saturday, April 27, they were at it again, hammer and tongs.

At about 9 A.M. Phibbs repeated that he wanted no more of Riding, that he preferred Nancy and would go with her. Riding drank

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Lysol, but it had no effect. While Graves, Nancy, and Phibbs watched, she said, "Goodbye, chaps!" and jumped from the window. Graves and Nancy were horrified. Phibbs took to his heels without waiting to find out whether she was dead or alive.

Riding kept returning to this topic in her writings—in the preface to *Poems: A Joking Word,* in *Everybody's Letters,* and in *14A*—always describing Phibbs as "the devil" and representing herself as poetically motivated rather than emotionally frustrated.

T. E. Lawrence, who visited Laura in the hospital as soon as he could, and who stuck by Graves as he always did when the latter was in trouble, wrote about the affair to his confidante Charlotte Shaw (Mrs. Bernard Shaw) on May 22, 1929. It is an almost wholly accurate report of what happened.

> . . . thence to London, where I saw Laura Riding. She has broken her pelvis, and three bones in her spine, but will recover, they say, in six months. For love of an Irishman, Geoffrey Phibbs (who did not love her any more), she had thrown herself down four stories into Graves's area at Chiswick.

Graves, he continued, jumped after her (as he did, but from the third story). He told Mrs. Shaw of how Nancy had now gone to live with Phibbs, and of how Phibbs's wife lived "every six months or so" with Garnett. "They are madhouse minds: no, not so much minds as appetites." The mess, he thought, might have solved Robert's difficulties. "He is a most excellent and truthful person, drowning in a quagmire."

Riding landed on her coccyx, and suffered a compound fracture of the spine. (When the surgeon came to operate on her, her spine was "at right angles to itself," a rare phenomenon; and her pelvis was fractured in five places.) Nancy called for an ambulance; Graves, though very shaken by his own wild jump, carried her into it.

The double jump was reported by eager neighbors to the police, who thought that they had an attempted murder—or with luck, a murder—on their hands. The now terrified Phibbs soon returned to the district, and made an incoherent statement, which put Graves into an even more difficult position. It led them to suspect Graves of attempted murder, and so they grilled him more intensively. He stood up to it—but never forgot their attitude. It was one of the experiences that made him want to leave England.

Until well after WW II attempted suicide was a crime under English law. Legally, Riding could be prosecuted. But had she been charged, she would not have been sent to prison (as some people were); as an American citizen, she would have been deported.

She was thus not only very ill indeed—thought of at first, by all, as a future cripple at best—but also under threat of a humiliating legal process. So when he was grilled by the police Graves had to be very careful what he said: he must not incriminate Laura, but he was simultaneously obliged to clear himself of attempted murder, with which the police were eager to charge him. He played his cards very close to his chest.

Graves stated that there had been an accident, but little else. He had to pretend that he had gone to fetch an emetic for the Lysol and that Laura had jumped when Nancy was alone in the room, with her back turned: Phibbs, for all he knew, had accused him of murder. Certainly Phibbs thought Laura was dead, and accused her of having delusions of grandeur. The police thought of her as a "vampire." In answer to persistent questioning he was as cryptic as he dared to be. Later Phibbs excused himself, in a letter, by accusing Graves of having told the police what he himself in fact had told them: that "immorality" had been going on. "Surely neither you nor I are *ashamed* of the way life was led at the flat?" Graves maintained an insolently aristocratic manner in the face of the policemen's persistent questions, and in the end they had to give up.

As for Phibbs, he remained unrepentant. He thought (he wrote) that Riding was suffering from an intellectual disorder. But he continued to be fascinated by her.

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The closest Riding ever came to describing her jump, in writing, is in the preface to *Poems: A Joking Word* (1930). This is one of her least lucid pieces (she wrote it without Graves's assistance), but some meaning may be extracted from it by those who know the background. She states here that Phibbs (who is not named) was "the Devil and also Judas and so on." "Once upon a time" she was "standing in a room with" him and with "the Virgin Mary who was also Medea and so on" (Nancy); also there was "a third who was about to finish with that kind of thing" (Graves). "Myself I had already finished." In a contorted passage, Phibbs is said to have been pretending to "be with doom rather than with nature," but really "with nature . . . on the point of just ending." "Nature," to this latter-day Borborite, is matter; "doom" is "good" because it ends time. "My life," she wrote in this preface—meaning by "life" involvement in "history" and "nature"—"reads all wrong to me because it is what would be me if I didn't feel doom." "My life is feeling myself as me, my poems are feeling myself as doom." "My life is me instead of doom, me postponing doom." In her poems, she felt, she escaped "from escaping" her life.

She wrote that Phibbs was interested only in suicide ("it was all very underhand"), and continued: "Well, I gave him suicide."

> And working on the Virgin Mary and so on's [Nancy's] natural (I mean not personal) feelings against doom as possible opposition, he got her to about turn against herself and go out with him . . . . Standing in that room was a quick result—I left that room, by the window of course, and poems came with me.

All this is exceedingly complex, and some passages which I have not quoted are impenetrable and tiresomely repetitious in a Steinesque manner. But there was in Riding an element of, to put it at its simplest, struggle against the flesh and what the flesh represents. The attempt at suicide was, as Gertrude Stein soon afterward implied, poignant rather than "hysterical," as has been suggested. The flaw in the whole self-justificatory argument, such as it is, is that she failed to acknowledge her own jealousy, which had a physical as well as mental basis.

When she was too young to understand that personal hope is not identical with universal hope, Riding seemed beautiful to Graves. Some of her early poems are redolent with this beauty:

> As well as any other, Erato,
> I can dwell separately on what men know
> In common secrecy,
> And celebrate the old, adoréd rose,
> Retell—oh why—how similarly grows
> The last leaf of the tree . . . .

It is breathtaking, as is so much else she wrote. It exudes the spirit with which Graves fell in love; but there was not much more of it to come from the woman herself, though miraculously she went on writing beautiful poems until stopped by the man she finally fell in with. The end of "The Mask" (written in her youth in America) answered a question that had always troubled Graves:

> Is there no pure then?
> The eternal taint wears beauty like a mask.
> But a mask eternal.

Such an altruistic beauty, even if not permanently displayed, such uncompromising intelligence compounded with innocence and ignorance, poignant uprightness—such qualities, born out of untroubled and rapturous nature by whatever developed the human cortex to the point of word-making, are deadly attributes in a world disobedient to the will of any single person. There is a terrible courage in Riding's confusions.

"Mr. Graves" is "persistent," Riding wrote in 1974, when she had long hated him. She should know. She wrote of him in 1930, in that preface to her *Poems: A Joking Word:* "He concentrated on living enough so that I could dilate on feeling doom." This statement bears thinking about. It was what he craved; but could he stand it?

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V

When Riding found herself to be not dead, but a shattered and perhaps permanently crippled being whose severe pain had to be relieved by constant shots of morphia, she immediately remembered Phibbs. She still "wanted" him. When she had recovered her health, and knew that she could not change the situation between Phibbs and Nancy, she was for some time pleasant—and generally grateful—to Graves. Immediately after the fall, however—and despite her pain and the threat of criminal proceedings—she still tried to settle affairs in the way in which she deemed they ought to be settled. The police soon satisfied themselves that Riding had not been pushed out of the window. When Graves and Nancy visited the hospital, she told them that, on recovering, she wished to take "full responsibility for what had occurred." This was helpful and scrupulous: it cleared everyone of suspicion.

The police were left with only one opportunity: to charge Riding with attempted suicide. But she was still seriously ill.

On Monday, April 29, two days after Riding's jump, Graves himself was taken ill, and had to enter the hospital. He often used to complain, part jokingly, of how no one sympathized with *his* fall (Riding made a point of not doing so). But before this he had written to his old friend, Eddie Marsh (who was then secretary to Winston Churchill at the Exchequer and who therefore had only indirect influence at the Home Office), asking if he could do anything to prevent the deportation of Riding as an "undesirable alien." Marsh replied loyally and promptly. His letter made it clear that he could offer some hope.

He told Graves that he had "had a long talk" with a private secretary at the Home Office, "whose sympathy I managed to enlist." This secretary had promisd to talk to the Director of Public Prosecutions. He thought that there would be a good chance of avoiding action, but that if the DPP wanted to take it "it would be . . . impossible for the Home Secretary to override him."

The result of this was that "after investigation the Home Office did not pursue the matter." Riding later sneered at Graves's use of "influence" in this affair, in *14A*. Perhaps he did make a little too much of it: he is fond of having influence.

On the day after Riding's jump, a Sunday, Geoffrey Phibbs had delivered to the hospital, by Nancy, his penciled note, scribbled on a small memo leaf, to

> Laura Laura Laura
> I didn't understand. I was so full of my own shame. Shame at all I had made you suffer that I didn't believe you could ever want me again. You didn't tell me yesterday (Saturday). I ought to have known but I did (do) feel so unworthy. Nancy just did break down after all the strain and had this night-mare and couldn't let me out of her sight. She didn't believe that I'd go away. She thought she might wake up & find she'd dreamt it all. Oh Laura

But by the evening of the day on which he wrote this he had already joined Nancy on the *Ringrose*.

Nancy came to visit Robert on the following day, in the hospital, and told him that on the previous day she had met Phibbs, "accidentally," in the lobby of the Plaza Cinema, "and that she was living with him on the house-boat Ringrose." Graves was "very ill at the time" and told Nancy unequivocally that "he no longer had any faith in Mr. Phibbs as a friend and could not welcome him back."

Nancy then went straight off to visit Laura, who was still "critical." From her she received an answer contradicting Graves's. Nancy read out Phibbs's message ("Laura Laura Laura . . ."), and then passed on the further information that he was

> full of remorse for the confusion of his conduct and its consequences, and that he would obey whatever feelings she [Laura] might have in the matter.

Nancy had Phibbs in the wings, ready to be brought out to see Laura—if she would permit it. She did: she told him that "if Miss

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Nicholson and Mr. Graves were satisfied that Mr. Phibbs should return she was too."

But, as the "Précis" puts it:

> Miss Riding was under morphia a great deal of this time . . . nevertheless she was gradually able to work out when Mr. Graves was able to leave hospital and visit her and from conversation with other friends that the friendship of the four had come to an end because Miss Nicholson, who had ceased visiting her, and Mr. Phibbs had now entered into a relationship the spirit of which overshadowed the friendship of the four.

This was regarded by Graves and Riding as Phibbs's most culpable deceit of all, "*after* the fall," as Graves put it in a letter to Marsh.

Graves had forced himself to enter into a spirit of the Four as prescribed by Riding; but when he heard that Phibbs had now taken over Nancy and his children, he could no longer bear it. The sense of release from the effort of having to love Geoffrey was also triggered by his feeling that his rival was responsible for Laura's injuries. For quite some time the Trinity, however odd it may now seem to us, had actually worked. Nancy had not objected to Graves's relationship with Riding: indeed, before Laura turned up she had found herself unhappy in her married state, as he had. But the Four put too much strain on everyone, not least Phibbs. What preoccupied Graves's mind as he lay ill in his hospital bed was the fact that this "awful bastard" had come along and spoiled everything.

Riding, however, had physical as well as spiritual motives. Graves had blinded himself to this. Paradoxically, she craved for greater firmness than she found in Graves. The cruelty in Phibbs perversely appealed to her. And so Graves's erotic performance towards her had been undermined by his insistence on her superiority to him. Her spirit, which had sought to transform Phibbs into a fit collaborator in a fundamental work "of a philosophical nature," was also undermined, from the start, by a vulgarity in herself so insidious that she herself could not admit of its existence. This contradiction in her unnerved even Phibbs, who saw it clearly in his closest encounters with her. But Graves wrote to Marsh that the "sex thing" (with Phibbs) was not important to him or Laura. This was simply self-deception. The flesh is willing, and the spirit is weak—and he and she ought to have known it.

VI

Some time before Sunday, May 12, when Riding felt better and understood that Nancy had lied to her in the hospital, she told Phibbs that she never wanted to see him again. She was then certain about this, even though awaiting a critical operation (this took place on the following Thursday, May 16, and was successful).

Phibbs suddenly felt insulted, vicious, and revengeful. This new mood, induced by her total rejection of him and by Graves's sarcastic hostility, was interrupted by intermittent bursts of impudence, mawkish self-pity, envy—and genuine good will. But he was basically concerned to defend himself—to assuage what must have been a considerable sense of guilt and shame—by going on the attack.

The negotiations then became furious, and the more furious they became the more ridiculous. Phibbs was divided: on the one hand, he wanted Graves and Riding to think well of him; on the other, he wanted to "throw [Laura] out of the window" himself and "break her bloody neck." He was confused by Riding's constant complex messages from the hospital, delivered through a by-now wholly ferocious Graves: he was to "define his position" but before this he was to define "define" and "position." From Laura this was elementary stuff indeed. Nancy kept silent, but extracted money from Graves on the pretext that she was no longer living in sin (they used a neutral shop address). Phibbs, under a barrage of written accusations from Graves, and then a series of rude messages from Laura after she had left the hospital, vengefully decided to sue Laura for the return of some books which he

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had contributed to the once "joint-library." He soon withdrew the summons and went off with Nancy to the cottage at Islip (whose rent Graves, or his mother, was paying); from there he went away with her to Berkshire, where they lived together for some years before he left her for another woman, "because [he] wanted children of his own." Of Laura's much-vaunted "holiness" he remarked: "holiness in the sense of holes into which she wants me to fall. Holes I fall through. Maggots eat holes."

Considering its fame as a literary scandal and its importance in Graves's life, the whole episode figures rather oddly in *Goodbye to All That*. In the second, revised edition of 1957 it is entirely excluded and Laura Riding is not mentioned. But in the first version, written at white heat between May and July of 1929—when Graves did not, as he puts it, care what anyone thought of him—the subject does appear, if strangely, in the short "Dedicatory Epilogue to Laura Riding" (deleted in the second edition), which he begins by telling her that she will "be glad to find no reference at all to yourself in this book." "The reason," he explains, "is . . . that by mentioning you as a character in my autobiography I would seem to be denying you in your true quality of one living invisibly against kind, as dead, beyond event." So (he continued) he had written the book "backward from where you are"; had he written it forward instead he would "still be inside the body of it, arguing morals, literature, politics . . . indeed, rather against myself."

There was in 1929 a plain reason for omitting Laura Riding from his "story": that, he felt, was "history," whereas she, because she convinced him that she had "died" over the Phibbs affair, was Truth and therefore out of time. But he could not resist adding that final Dedicatory Epilogue, so cryptic to the readers of the time. It was precisely akin to a sudden religious conversion. Laura Riding was God(ess): he had rediscovered the paternalistic faith he had lost in the early years of fighting in France, but in a true, feminized form. The moral purity which he had inherited from his mother was satisfied, but satisfied in a suitably sophisticated form.

Graves told me in 1951 that he felt he had treated Nancy badly, and that his "punishment" had been Laura, by which he meant the post-1929 Laura. Since they virtually stopped being lovers in 1929, Graves's remaining years with Riding (they parted company in 1939) included his being "lessoned" in how to do without sex: "bodies have had their day" pronounced Riding in 1930. Even so, Graves went with her to the mountain village of Deyá in Mallorca, continued with the Seizin Press, and continued to worship her. When she fell in love with a rough-mannered American farmer who had literary pretensions, it nearly drove him out of his mind: only the presence of his second wife, Beryl, saved his sanity.

In retrospect Graves sees Riding as having been "holy" before the Phibbs incident but corrupted and corrupting after it. But he speaks about it little, and has not written about it in intimate terms, except occasionally in private letters.

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Signs of passion: the new expressionism

by Hilton Kramer

The fact is, that both finish and impetuosity, specific minuteness and large abstraction, may be signs of passion, or of its reverse; may result from affection or indifference, intellect or dulness . . . . Now both the finish and incompletion are right where they are signs of passion or of thought, and both are wrong, and I think the finish the more contemptible of the two, where they cease to be so.
—John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

The eruption of new stylistic initiatives in art, although anything but a novelty in the cultural history of the present century, can still be counted on to have a disconcerting effect on established taste. At times it may even inspire anger and resentment among the very people who pride themselves on being ready for anything in art—especially anything radical. Exactly why, at this late date, this should continue to be the case is, on the face of it, a little baffling.

Change, after all—incessant and insistent change—has been the rule in the life of art for as long as anyone can now remember. It was the basic principle that governed the development of art in the age of the avant-garde. And the velocity of change, far from slackening in recent generations, has, if anything, only accelerated. Certainly no other culture in the recorded history of civilization has been subjected to the kind of unremitting pressure of innovation in art that has long been a commonplace feature of ours.

Yet, although the phenomenon is a familiar one, we still seem to be very divided in our response to it. We are at once inured to it and disturbed by it. We embrace it and we resist it in equal measure. Change represents vitality to us—but it is also threatening. Stability suggests a loss of energy and momentum, inspiring fears of sterility and decay, but there is a place in our minds—and in our hearts!—that nonetheless longs for some permanent or protracted release from the constant hammerblows of change. It is thus one of the peculiarities of our cultural condition that we are made as anxious by the absence of change as we are made apprehensive by the demands of its headlong course. Our relation to art is, in this respect, rather like our relation to marriage. We may be deeply dismayed by the dramatic rise in the divorce rate, feeling that it represents a form of social pathology, but we nonetheless cherish the freedom it offers us. At the same time—a further paradox!—we recognize that the number of divorces is constantly swelled by those who divorce only in order to remarry at the earliest opportunity. We seem to "marry" and "divorce" new styles in art today with a similarly divided heart. It is one of the enduring legacies of the avant-garde tradition.

The eruption of a new Expressionist movement in art—the so-called Neo-Expressionism that has lately achieved such a swift and formidable presence on the international art scene—unquestionably represents

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one of the most spectacular and unexpected "divorce" cases in recent cultural history. Not since the emergence of Pop art in the early 1960s have we seen anything of comparable consequence in the realm of contemporary painting. In some important respects, of course, this movement has been impelled by an outright desire on the part of a new generation of artists to repeal some of the characteristic features not only of Pop art but of certain other styles, too—especially Minimal art and Color-field painting—that won an easy and unassailable dominance in the Sixties and have ever since exerted an immense influence on contemporary taste. This, certainly, has given the movement its central animus and accounts for much of its appeal. It is the appeal of an art movement that re-opens many questions that, for a generation or more, had mistakenly been considered closed by what passed for "advanced" opinion.

What these rejected features of the art of the Sixties are, and what Neo-Expressionist painting offers as an alternative to them—these are issues that go to the heart of the fateful revision in artistic outlook that is now upon us. Yet it must also be recognized that the Neo-Expressionist movement, however radical its break with the art of the Sixties may be, has something in common—sociologically, at least, if not aesthetically or spiritually—with the Pop movement itself. For like Pop, it belongs unmistakably to the post-avant-garde era. Which is to say, to a period when virtually every new initiative in art has enjoyed an immediate and untroubled access to the limelight, and has thus been condemned—or should one say privileged? opinions will naturally vary on this question—to develop its strengths, display its weaknesses, and otherwise shape its destiny in full view of an eager and curious public. Thus, the historical entry point of Neo-Expressionism inevitably plays a role in determining the spirit as well as the dynamics of the art which the movement has produced.

It is no exaggeration to say that at the moment of the movement's entry onto the art scene in the 1970s, Expressionism—particularly the kind of Expressionism that attached itself to figural and/or symbolic motifs—had long been regarded as a despised and moribund style. Abstract Expressionism was honored as a museum classic, of course, and its living representatives continued to be esteemed even by the generation that rejected its artistic practices. The art of the Sixties may have placed itself in opposition to Abstract Expressionism, but it was the kind of opposition that granted its opponent a high status and never for a moment questioned its right to exist. A good many of the artists who achieved fame and influence in the Pop and Minimal movements had, in fact, begun their careers as apprentices to the Abstract Expressionist style, and the Color-field painters were never concerned to deny their debt to it. It was a very different story, however, with the figural Expressionism that had its origins in Northern and Central Europe in the years preceding the First World War. For the artists of the Sixties, this earlier Expressionist school hardly counted. Even painters of the stature of Munch, Kokoschka, and Beckmann were condescended to as démodé figures representing a distant and alien tradition. To suggest that their art remained a vital and valuable component of the modern movement and might even have something important to contribute to the art of our time was, in the smug and "swinging" art world of the Sixties, to invite ridicule.

The reasons for this attitude are anything but obscure. There existed, first of all, a widespread assumption that the ascendancy of abstract art represented a permanent and irreversible condition of contemporary artistic expression. The international art scene could boast of many admired figures whose work did not conform to this assumption—Dubuffet, de Kooning, Morandi, Balthus, and Bacon were only the most famous, and there were others as well. But these artists were too diverse in their respective styles and spirit to constitute an alternative tradition. They could be imitated—and they

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were, often shamelessly. But they could not be made the basis of a powerful new initiative in art. Established critical opinion regarded them as glorious exceptions. It was abstraction that was thought to embody the mainstream.

Abstraction, moreover, was itself undergoing a significant change. In the art of the Sixties it was systematically stripped of its Expressionist attributes. All evidence of subjective emotion, every impulse toward improvisation and what Ruskin had called "impetuosity" and "incompletion," anything that suggested the role of the unconscious or of the irrational in art was suppressed in favor of clean surfaces and hard edges, of instant legibility, transparency, and order. The rising generation seemed to harbor a profound aversion to anything in art that smacked of mystery or interiority. There was a virtual ban on revelations of the soul. Incitements to feeling were looked upon as a kind of vulgarity. For the first time in the history of criticism, boredom in art was upheld as an exemplary emotion.[1] We had entered the era of "cool" and impersonal styles.

Pop art, which decisively challenged the authority of abstraction by seizing upon the imagery of mass culture and elevating it to the status of fine art, carried this tendency toward impersonality in art a fateful step further. It added an insouciant and infectious element of irony—and at times, even mockery—to the dandified detachment that had already overtaken abstraction. It was in Pop art, indeed, that the tendency toward a "cool" and impersonal style was given its historic apotheosis. For it brought to this tendency an easy sociability, and made it both entertaining and accessible. Unlike the austere and utopian art of the Minimalists, Pop art was worldly and relaxed. It winked at its public, and invited it to have a good time. It beckoned us to furlough our doubts and anxieties, to expel the very idea of the metaphysical and dwell forever in a universe of bright, untroubled social surfaces.

It will be readily seen, then, why no place could be found for the Expressionist impulse in the atmosphere generated by this attitude. Expressionism does not lend itself to tidiness or detachment. Its tendency is to be "hot" rather than "cool." It abounds in references to the visionary and the irrational, and the very marks it makes on canvas or paper are unabashed avowals of feeling. Expressionism, indeed, looks upon painting as a medium of discovery and exploration. It exults in painting's physical properties, which it looks to as a means of generating images and stirring the emotions. Above all, it has a hearty appetite for the metaphysical and the mysterious.

Historians will be pondering for a long time to come exactly why it was that the art of the Sixties proved to be so categorically inhospitable to these impulses. It was, after all, a decade otherwise remarkable for its heat. With its drug culture and dropout mentality, its social radicalism and sexual revolutionism, its opposition to bourgeois order and its embrace of apocalyptic and irrational visions of the future, the whole ethos of the Sixties—especially in what came to be called its counterculture—would seem to have offered extremely fertile ground for the growth of an Expressionist movement. But

1 Lest anyone think that I exaggerate, it is worth recalling what Barbara Rose, then one of the champions of the emerging Minimal art movement, wrote in its defense at the time. In an essay called "ABC Art," which appeared in *Art in America* in 1965 and exerted a considerable influence on the contemporary art scene, Miss Rose wrote as follows: "If, on seeing some of the new paintings, sculptures, dances, or films, you are bored, probably you were intended to be. Boring the public is one way of testing its commitment. The new artists seem to be extremely chary; approval, they know, is easy to come by in this seller's market for culture, but commitment is nearly impossible to elicit. So they make their art as difficult, remote, aloof and indigestible as possible. One way to achieve this is to make art boring. Some artists, often the most gifted, finally end by finding art a bore." And Barbara Rose was by no means the only art critic of the period to discover a kind of aesthetic honor in the phenomenon of deliberate boredom in art.

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it was not to be. Instead, as we know, this hottest of decades was adamant in favoring the coolest of art styles. The Expressionist impulse was reserved for life, not art.

The fact is, the relations that obtain between art and society, between creation and history, are generally more paradoxical and less straightforward than is commonly supposed. Which is why, when the Neo-Expressionists broke upon us in the late Seventies and early Eighties, a good many people were stunned and unprepared. Compared to the upheavals that had occurred in the Sixties, the Western world was a cooler place in the late Seventies. Its art seemed to have settled into a placid pluralism. After years of resisting the notion that the age of the avant-garde had passed, the last diehards had just about given in. The big events commanding the attention of the international art community were mainly retrospective in character. Almost no one was ready to face a new and unfamiliar disruption that challenged the reigning taste. Yet when the Neo-Expressionist challenge came—and it came swiftly, in several countries at once—it obviously struck a nerve. There were cries of horror and cries of fraud, of course, and the usual allegations of conspiracy. Critics who had not been averse to endorsing every fashionable reputation for twenty years found themselves in the odd position of denouncing, of all things, a new "fashion." The situation was not without its comical aspects for anyone with the wit to appreciate them.

Clearly, something important had occurred. A genuine change in taste was upon us. In this respect I should like to quote, if I may, from a review-article I wrote in *The New York Times* in April 1981. It was occasioned by the coincidence of two solo exhibitions in New York—those of Malcolm Morley and Julian Schnabel—and my warrant for quoting it here lies in the fact that it has already been much quoted (not always correctly or sympathetically) elsewhere. "Nothing is more incalculable in art—or more inevitable—than a genuine change in taste," I wrote, and then offered the following observations: "Although taste seems to operate by a sort of law of compensation, so that the denial of certain qualities in one period almost automatically prepares the ground for their triumphal return later, its timetable can never be accurately predicted. Its roots lie in something deeper and more mysterious than mere fashion. At the heart of every genuine change in taste there is, I suppose, a keen feeling of loss, an existential ache—a sense that something absolutely essential to the life of art has been allowed to fall into a state of unendurable atrophy. It is to the immediate repair of this perceived void that taste at its profoundest level addresses itself."

The feeling of loss that I spoke of in this article was keen indeed. For nearly two decades, all the styles approved by "advanced" opinion had prohibited large areas of experience from playing any role whatever in the creation of new art. More specifically, the experience of the Sixties—not the art styles of the Sixties but the social and spiritual experience—had been programmatically denied entry into the pictorial imagination. Toward this realm of experience the visual arts adopted an amnesiac stance. Art seemed to have lost its capacity to pay attention to the world it occupied. The experience of the Sixties and the changes it effected—in family life, in the relation of the sexes, in clothes and work and education and religion—caused havoc in a great many lives, yet the trauma brought about by these profound changes was more or less declared off limits as far as painting was concerned. An intolerable tension was thus created between art and life.

It was in the attempt to relieve and resolve this tension that the Neo-Expressionist movement was born. Its first task was to restore to painting its capacity to encompass the kind of poetry and fantasy that had long been denied to it, and toward that end it was obliged to mount an attack—sometimes, it seemed, literally—on the picture surface. What was discarded straightaway was the easy legibility and transparency that, in truth, had long ago degenerated into a facile

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convention. Instead of leaving everything out of painting, and making a neat, clean, perfect form of what remained, the Neo-Expressionists were clearly determined to put everything in. Their paintings swamped the eye with vivid images and tactile effects, relying more on instinct and imagination than on careful design. The mystical, the erotic, and the hallucinatory were once again made welcome in painting, which was now determined to shun the immaculate and the austere in favor of energy, physicality, and surfeit.

It was this experience of surfeit, I think, that had the most unsettling effect on established taste. We had grown used to the idea that changes in pictorial style inevitably entailed depletion and purification. For a hundred years or more, the vitality of painting had seemed to depend on stripping it of its conventions and resources in order to isolate some irreducible core or essence. By placing itself in open opposition to this tendency, the Neo-Expressionist movement did something more than offer itself as a new style. It put into question the very practice of identifying the vitality of art with this process of progressive depletion. It was this that proved so disturbing to purist taste. A precious piety was being challenged, and a long-standing trend reversed. No wonder there were cries of anguish and fraud. Something similar had occurred in response to the Surrealist movement in the Twenties and Thirties, and even today there are partisans of abstract art who look upon all of Surrealism as a phenomenon that lies outside the boundaries of the modern movement, which is redefined to exclude such "aberrant" tendencies. But exercises of this sort belong to the realm of polemic rather than to art history or criticism.

It is too early, of course, to chart the boundaries of the Neo-Expressionist movement, or to offer more than tentative judgments about its achievements. The movement is still young and new—a fact that is sometimes forgotten in the midst of the publicity and the controversy it has inspired. We have lived with it for less than a decade—more like a half decade really. Its leading figures are anything but fixed in their course, and, as usually happens with such movements when they achieve an overnight celebrity, new painters seem to join its ranks with every sunrise. Just now it seems to me that the best of the Neo-Expressionist painters is probably Malcolm Morley, the British-born artist who now lives in the United States. His exhibition at Fourcade's in April 1981 was one of those rare art events that stays fixed in the mind with an extraordinary vividness. Interestingly, Mr. Morley's work is quite close in some of its aspects to that of the contemporary Realists—more so, anyway, than the work of any other Neo-Expressionist I have seen. His landscape paintings, for example, have the kind of weather-perfect depictive accuracy we so much admire in certain Realist landscapes. Yet elsewhere, especially in a wild picture called *Camels and Goats* and even in a very funny one called *The Grand Bayonette Charge of the French Legionnaires in the Sahara,* he generates a heat that has less to do with faithful observation than with the inventions of the imagination. It is as if the pastoral element in Constable had been crossed with some of the sweep and fury of Delacroix's mythological paintings. Mr. Morley is, in any case, a painter of large powers.

If Mr. Morley is probably the best of these painters, the worst just now—although competition for the position will soon be fierce—is very likely David Salle, an American painter whose facile conjunctions of abstraction and representation (a vague bit of Mondrian, say, placed in artful juxtaposition to a rough sketch of a female nude) are little more than a formula designed to satisfy every taste. Far more interesting is the work of Julian Schnabel, another young American painter who has been elevated to precisely the kind of overnight stardom that causes many people to assume he must be wholly lacking in talent. (Scarcely thirty years old, Mr. Schnabel has already had the distinction of having "retrospective" exhibitions of his work mounted at the Tate Gallery in London and the Stedelijk Museum

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in Amsterdam.) The truth is, the critics who have attacked his work are not entirely wrong. He is a very uneven painter. But when he is really painting, and not just covering the surfaces of his pictures with broken crockery and sundry other unlovely objects, he brings a nightmare energy and imagination to his art that is powerful indeed. The marvelous picture called *Death Takes a Holiday,* for example, takes authoritative possession of one of the archetypal themes in Western art—the figure of death as a human skeleton mounted on horseback—and transforms it into an image of epic force. Mr. Schnabel is the kind of artist who will always be a problem for criticism, for there is an element of vulgarity and a coarseness of feeling in his work that is very much at odds with an authentic vein of poetry.

Yet, however uneven some of their work may be, these and other painters in this movement—George Baselitz, A. R. Penck, and Markus Lüpertz in West Germany, Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, and Enzo Cucchi in Italy, Ken Kiff in England, and Susan Rothenberg in the United States—have already made an enormous difference in our experience of contemporary art, and a great difference, too, in what might be called the geography of contemporary art. For the first time in a generation or more, painters are no longer constrained to conceal their native roots. The American artists in the movement are not easily confused with the Italians, and the Italians strike us as very different from the Germans—as well as from each other. The pressure upon art to look anonymous and "international" is clearly inappropriate to a style that requires of an artist that he put more of the self into the very center of his work. Art is once again a medium of dreams and memories, of symbols and scenarios of the affective life. It has reacquired its capacity for drama—most especially the drama of the self in both its conscious and unconscious intercourse with the world "out there." This is in itself an historic reversal of considerable consequence, and we shall be living with the result for years to come. It alters our very expectations about art.

In the passage from *Modern Painters* I have quoted as the epigraph to this essay, John Ruskin reminds us that in every pictorial style—whether governed by "finish" or "impetuosity"—what we most value and most vividly respond to are what he calls "signs of passion or of thought." Neo-Expressionism is certainly not the only painting on the contemporary scene that meets this demand. But because—just now, anyway, when its energies are still fresh and its capacities are expanding—it so abounds in those precious "signs of passion," its appeal is irresistible.

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William Gerhardie: a resurrection

by Hortense Calisher

William Gerhardie was born in St. Petersburg in 1895, on the edge of all the twentieth century would become. His childhood home, built by his British parents, the father from a family long cotton brokers there, was "a baroque house, replica of a wing of the Vienna Belvedere, built as a permanent stronghold on a quay overlooking the Neva . . . which accommodated several big industrialists, the Swedish Nobel among them—each with his appropriate mansion next to his works . . . . An unfortunate combination," since it suggested to the workers in the mills "that they were [working] to enable the owner to live in his mansion . . . which during strikes and revolutions prompted them to hurl stones through the windows . . . . We children would be drawn away . . . while a squadron of Cossacks, summoned by telephone, occupied the millyard . . . . So it came about that what had been built as stronghold was taken from us at the end of eighteen years."

The first chapter in his *Memoirs of a Polyglot* (1931), an autobiography more or less confirming as fact much that he had already written as fiction, is entitled "Birth of an Author." As the fifth child of six he would joke that his parents had had to produce four before achieving a masterpiece—for he was considered the family fool. His elder sister was "fragile, lovely and hysterical" and possibly an early prototype of his own later taste in women and heroines. His elder brother was naturally a rival. He himself "walked a little in fear of my father," who had "moments of rage and terrific energy . . . balanced by perfect composure" and could remain "virtually silent while entertaining the son of a grand duke." His own son would always remain impressed by noble lineage. At sixteen, having done poorly at the Annenschule, where he was schooled in English and German, he was sent to a secretarial college in England, though even his use for commerce was humiliatingly in doubt. Yet when he reported that he had lost his Christmas ticket home and had had to borrow from an acquaintance on the train, his father replied in a gentle puff of smoke, "It's experience." Perhaps by then he had surmised that William in a larger sense would always find acquaintances on the train.

By the time he did get to university, after World War I, he would affect the airs of an aesthete, though he had survived a short, miserable term as a volunteer private in a garrison at York, from which he had been rescued, not quite fortuitously, to serve as an officer with the British Military Mission to Siberia, where he had done well enough to bring home an O.B.E. Still, he had an accent, or an overtone, and a red-lipped, impulsively non-stop manner which both enchanted people and put them off. Shortly one sees him in that famous elder company which *Futility* and *The Polyglots,* his first two novels, so soon brought him, or among the young insouciants of the period, a brash

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and vulnerable young man, remembering everything and forgiving nothing, painting all to match his own intensity. In Russia his family had been "socially looked up to by people we knew, while knowing nothing of any people who would have cared to look down on us. For a sensitive writer this is half the battle. He matures quickly . . . not distorted by envy, and bitterness and suspicion . . . born a free man with his nervous force unimpaired," an advantage over "those who must exercise all their strength in rebellion, with little humor or grace to dispose of in the service of art." Yet he had already remarked: "That I have spent my first eighteen years in St. Petersburg is something which five years in the British Army, three at Oxford and the rest of my life in England can never undo."

The rest of his life, at what—thirty-six? It would be a prophetic phrase. At the time of the memoirs his two fêted novels were well behind him; nothing written since had been as praised. During his lifetime none of his other works would be as known, and he would spend his latter years on a purportedly major work, which when exposed by death would be revealed as only slightly more than a mass of notes. Meanwhile, the family fool had become the family mainstay, even if only under that anomalous approval which many a writer-fool learns to accept. As a writer, his own mainstay is already "My Vanished Years" (another chapter title in the memoirs) and his attitude toward both literary and social acceptance discomfitingly self-contradictory.

It is no wonder. They had been rich; suddenly they had no money. They were to be successively expatriates of long and honored duration, then personae non gratae or worse in a country gone foreign on them, and finally émigrés in their own. He was always having to explain the difference between his nativity and his nationality. In an Anglo society even his name gives him trouble, driving him to propose both that it has a baronial origin and that people spell and pronounce it differently on alternate days of the week. And he knows too many languages.

> Of the four . . . taught me in childhood my knowledge of English was least . . . until I was eighteen . . . . With our parents, as a matter of duty, we spoke English . . . among ourselves we spoke Russian . . . with Fräulein, in the family seventeen years, we talked fluent German . . . when in danger as in a rocking boat, or overturned vehicle, we, by association of ideas, exclaim in German. We expostulate, as indeed you must, in French. But English, peppered with Russian, is now our more or less natural mode of expression.

In his written English he appears to be completely at home. If you could not swear it written by an Englishman you would not necessarily imagine otherwise. It is in fact that "disappearing" vehicle once so touted by the Maughamites as the only proper mode of narration, the classic tool; product of an English university education, which can be wielded by those neither born to it nor born at the top. Since Gerhardie was a writer of enormous gift it was better than that. He could turn a phrase, but his best turns would be those of the underlying wit, or in the realms of scene and character, where his extravagant material would be well served by an expressive coolth. He would never resort to Nabokov's rictus of language language language, although they share the habit of assertion and certain buffooneries therefrom. How they might hate each other, or, fatally knowing each other's complications, how they might mutually console. The overbrilliant conversationalist, who can acknowledge about himself that "Mr. Gerhardie is so clever he's a bore" and at Oxford wrote a critical study of Chekhov with some insights scholars may envy, might give us chapter and verse on how much of the other's originality actually depended from a Russian literary heritage for which we never sufficiently examined his books during his life. The old lepidopterist, who knew how to make the mourned past hover profitably over the present from book to charmed book, might give hints about spiritual staying power, and on how far into the worldly a writer may or may not safely de-

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part. The two do share a need to be both authoritative and constantly recognized for it—in what may stem from the unassuageably humbled vanity of the refugee, or the natural desperation of the visionary extraordinaire, or only their nearly joint and lost era of Russianness.

What are these books of a man's twenties, now either read long ago by a few or not at all, of which Shaw told him: "If you're English, not Russian, you're a genius"? And who and what—as Gerhardie himself expected the world to ask pronto, and this part of it did ask—was this mootly pronounceable young man? Touted by H. G. Wells, he was taken by him and by Lord Beaverbrook into the company of men as diverse as Arnold Bennett, D. H. Lawrence, and Bertrand Russell. There is evidence in the memoirs that Gerhardie may for a time have been taken in as well by that peculiarly accessible small English literary society wherein great and near-great and any interesting hangers-on may from day to day mingle, while the working mind keeps itself powerfully remote, and few or nobody may be socially faithful, much less intimate.

They must have apprehended at first sight and shortly confirmed what any reader must, that this writer's life and his fictions were more than ordinarily connected, yet not always satisfactorily so. Since Proust is Gerhardie's most quoted god, taking precedence over Goethe, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, more or less in that order, such a life-connection is no surprise. But Proust had gradually revealed himself in the act of revealing others, so that what we most want to know of him is ultimately satisfied fictionally, and a post-mortem curiosity about the actuality of his life is correspondingly mild. The art has taken precedence over the life.

But, as is already disturbingly evident in the *Memoirs,* Gerhardie may not be able to decide. We will find that in the early novels the narrators are, as in *Futility,* too tenderly young for that to matter, or, as in *The Polyglots,* that our doubt as to whether "George" is self-mocked or serious is merely teasingly right. The tone is perfect. In much of later Gerhardie we are to find a kind of dislocation, perhaps between his vulnerability and his boastfulness, which deflects the pointer both at him and away—and never quite enough at other people. Even at his tenderest toward them he will struggle with this, as in the novel so many years worked on, the beautiful *Of Mortal Love* (where this same equivocation is part of its subject) or in the curious dream-polemic, *Resurrection.*

The astonishing result is that this man's fictions, at their worst anticly and bathetically open, at their best marvellously inclusive of those fleeting life-constants we yearn to have transfixed for us, will often leave us with a kind of unslaked thirst unbecoming to fiction. We are less interested in his creatures than in him, who remains volatilely unfixed. We would like to be in his presence—and of course that too is immortality.

It can also be part of why a writer so touted early on and intermittently since remains largely unread. Yet, tracking his books, I was to find in the end that I wanted more for them than, for instance, what *A Quest for Corvo,* that wonderful literary chase, had done for the grandiloquent Baron's elaborately self-faked life and autotyped works. Certainly Gerhardie's later history, after such pyrotechnic, courts explanation. All the clichés, from illness to poverty to disappointment and reactive withdrawal, come to mind, as well as some not so simple. While in the midst of reading the works, I chanced to re-encounter a London friend who had known him well. There must be others from whom one could still hear firsthand. Yet after completing the reading I did not apply to my friend, as I had half intended. Gerhardie is so much more than a literary curiosity. With a writer of this class one's first fealty is to the work.

Michael Holroyd has for some years past been re-introducing Gerhardie (American editions of the 1920s and 1930s spell it "Gerhardi") in a new series, with prefaces both just and delicate. Of *Futility* he notes:

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> It is perhaps the first English work to strike the "waiting motif". . . to become so fashionable . . . in *Godot* . . . . The father who gathers about him an army of wrangling dependents as his hopes of fortune rise while his actual fortunes diminish, when asked at a crucial stage what he will do, decides 'I think I'll wait. It can't be long now.' Against this tragically changing background is the story of an Englishman brought up in Russia, and . . . his growing love for Nina, the second of three bewitching daughters.

He cites Edith Wharton, who broke her habit of no-comment to write a preface to *Futility*'s American edition: "One wonders at the firmness of the hand which has held together all the fun, pathos and irony of the thronged, sprawling tale and guided it so resolutely to an inevitable conclusion."[1]

Futility is all that and yet a young man's novel, a stunning first one, in which, if the vast range of attempted world consciousness and the gawks of first love do not quite meet, then perhaps they should not, while the human comedy is already the best grasped. Russianly, it has echoes not so much of the young Turgenev as of Turgenev writing about the young, as well as of Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood,* and *Youth*—and we of course recognize those three sisters, here waiting for more than Moscow. Prominent on a separate page is Gerhardie's epigraph: "(The 'I' of this book is not me.)" Yet in his own later words "that series of comic opera attempts to wipe out the Russian Revolution" will forever have brought him "not merely an adventure in futility . . . but an everchanging sense of being alive." *Futility*'s young narrator had already noted how rarely the present was as strong to him as the past and the future, and how love was always entangled with its background yet separate—both themes to stay with Gerhardie for life. From the first, however, Gerhardie will style himself a comic writer, and almost by obligation will fall for a good story, or a Gogolesque diversion, as with the incident in *Futility* of the waiter and the chicken soup, or the *Memoir*'s account of Gerhardie's own wild progress across Europe with his father's ashes. By then we may wonder if he has read Sterne. Perhaps he is now more English than he knows. Whatever, *Futility*'s Uncle Kostia, the clever writer sitting on his unwritten masterpiece, had already brooded "on the futility of writing": "Only ten percent, if that, of the substance of our thoughts and feelings can be transferred on paper." Dangerous thoughts for a writer, so early. Writing of him, one finds oneself using the word "already" very often. He had got his futilities young.

In *The Polyglots* a young officer, again attached to a military mission and here named George, is living with his eccentric relations and the people they accumulate, both for use and to be used by, in an oasis of lunacies petty and great, all rocking in the outer tide of world events sent them by "our war lords in their raving, disorderly madness." He is also writing a book, "Record of the States in the Evolution of an Attitude"—that harrowing puzzle of the subjective-objective which will preoccupy all the later incarnations of George. Sylvia, his cousin-lover, a silly Lilith and charming calculator herself betrayed, disappoints him intellectually, as all Gerhardie's dears must. Holroyd tells us Gerhardie's own Aunt Mary and Uncle Willy were the models for the unforgettable "Aunt Teresa" and "Uncle Lucy," while "that delectable nincompoop Silvia-Ninon is based on a girl Gerhardie met in Westbourne Grove." And the prototype of a host of heroines to come.

"Yet these are not private but universal characters . . . not comic 'Russian stereotypes.'" Perhaps not, though George has a sneaky flavor of anti-hero about him, the "delectable" a strong touch of Chekhov's "The Darling," and even the doomed little Natasha is as formidably sweet, saint-like, and pathetically encroached upon as the

1 These new editions of Gerhardie's works have been published in England by Macdonald & Co., Ltd. St. Martin's Press has published some of them in this country, including *Futility* (1971) and *The Polyglots* (1974).

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young and "pure" of that ilk often are in literature of whatever nationality—Boris in *The Counterfeiters* comes to mind. Certainly the Russian novel has elsewhere inured us to crowds of dependents in all their seriocomic complications, but here perhaps not Russia but life itself should be blamed. *The Polyglot*'s enchanting troupe of children, done with exceeding tenderness, is unique—as they are in Gerhardie's work. Perhaps the English are here responsible.

What is remarkable is how the strands have been connected, with a concision and perspective which are Gerhardie's own. Mr. Cephas, the merchant prince (whose palatial house reminds George of one in Petrograd) is "a crude but shy, diffident man . . . having done nothing in the war he felt the more diffident with people like us whom, on account of our heroic-looking uniforms, he imagined to be warriors." Of Mme. Negodyaev: ". . . hopeless natures like hers are easily let down by life, but on the other hand just as easily consoled by hopes as shadowy and baseless as those which they had just discarded." Her husband, the Captain, is "a rat in khaki, philosophising." By the time we read

> Uncle Emmanuel lit a cigar in the sunset; there was a pink gleam of light in his eye. I wondered whether he had a soul . . .

we concur, having been brought unusually close to this Edwardian rounder and womanizer by an author who, as the *Memoirs* will show, had brought all his own intelligence to bear on that score.

We will also accept the sunset. Gerhardie was never to be bothered by that verdict with which the emotionally enfeebled Ruskin had so saddled the academic imagination: "All violent feelings . . . produce a falseness in . . . impressions of eternal things, which I would generally characterize as the 'Pathetic Fallacy.'" For him the external, though not like Hardy's, was as vital to feeling, and his blending of the two is often where he is finest. Holroyd comments that Edith Wharton could never find anything to laugh at in *The Polyglots* and cites a *Times* article by Olivia Manning: "How did he become lost to view? How can we resurrect him? Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh, C. P. Snow, Kingsley Amis, William Cooper—all acknowledge his influence . . . . We all come out of him." Perhaps it is time for him to be released from his "comic" noose. Like the best of those mentioned, he has his own seriousness, which at its most sustained ranks with theirs.

I had read *The Polyglots* when young and again some years back, occasionally mentioning it, to little response. Two years ago I came across another Holroyd revival, *Of Mortal Love,* finding it masterly. No one I knew was familiar with it. Finally I got down to the quest and solicited all that the New York Society Library could send me.

What a rakish lot those first editions of the late 1920s and early 1930s can be in their very physical cast, slim or chunky in their handmade patterned covers, felty, long-lasting stock, string bindings just beginning to go, and type idiosyncratic or arty but always wonderfully readable. Margins! And yet so often, so sadly—for what? If ephemera can have the lasting tinge of a decade, these fizzy novels, play-it-with-your-guests game books, and night-table short stories, all aimed at the smart set, surely do. Yet, with their breakfast-at-a-nightclub brilliance, their giddy lost girls often so easily relocated under that green hat at the corner table, they can still attract. Perhaps their gaiety, a sentimental composite of the slightly amoral and the sadly coincidental, is always close to a war.

There were three of those: *Pending Heaven* (1930), short fictional pieces billed as short novels and gawky indeed; *Pretty Creatures* (1927), a "novel" little more than a chatty, jokey travel book with animadversions plentiful and some spark; and *Meet Yourself As You Really Are,* a question-and-answer game book done "in collaboration with Prince Leopold of Loewenstein" and billed as "Studies in Self-Analysis." In addition, a slim play, *Perfectly Scandalous,* of

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little mark, and a fat collaboration with Brian Lunn, *Memoirs of Satan,* a modernized "Crazy History" with Satan as narrator and with opening gambits such as "I start the human race by pandering to the advances of Dodo the she-ape" and chapterheads like "With the Old Boys—Lot, Job, etc."; then on to "The Meeting With Jesus" as well as with Tristan, Socrates, Luther, Loyola, et cetera, all the way to Shaw. Humorized history was a popular genre of the 1930s; a professor at Columbia had done a best-selling version of the Paris-Helen legend, or soon would, and in the daily-theme courses that were the college workshops of the period many clever undergraduates were doing likewise. In a long book, the genre is an impossible one; from the point of both history and mannerism one always knows what is coming next. A glance showed this one a grim waste of talent as well. Was I reading juvenilia, rousted out after the first two? I feared I was not.

One does not need to know Gerhardie's mottled destiny to find the *Memoirs* disquieting in its author's reactions to fame. On the one hand, there was presented a young man placed by luck, birth, and probably some effort at important events in influential company, but also able to record, in that inimitable mix of anger, satire, romance, and mortal concern with which two notable novels had familiarized us, such a passage (from the chapter "With the Diplomatists," subtitle, "Nightly Contemplations of Lenin"):

> Every evening on my way home I passed Khesinsky's house where the bearded prophet Lenin, among others, could be heard speaking from the garden wall. I would linger a while but not for long, for there was nothing in the man's speech or looks to give an inkling of his further career, and I was more concerned with thinking out the plot of my comedy, "The Khaki Armlet; or Why Clarence Left Home."

One grows used both to these wiseacre sorties, flirted before the reader like a matador's cape, and to the sudden incursion of serious comment on the artist's world, for whenever Gerhardie speaks as a writer on writing any of us will want to listen to some of the best expression I know of on the subject. On the other hand, there are the snobbisms, the name-droppings with in-the-same-breath put-downs of the said "names," and the backtalk on what the critics think of his recent books or expect of him, all signs that the "race"—as he sees the "visible world" of success—is not going entirely his way.

There is no doubt that he needed money and his books had not made much. There is also plain evidence that réclame, if it hadn't turned his canny head, had made him frenetically eager to keep in the swim, had even led him to putting his pen rather dubiously to the cause. It is not decent to be moral about this. Some artists can potboil, some cannot. Or some can, say, absorb the directional change the way a man leans into the wind. In Gerhardie's case, nothing he ever wrote would be without some élan, and all his concerns were so codified that he could write quickly. For a man whose imaginations were to be so literally fed by his life this could be risky indeed. His pen could both fritter and stand still. What the parade of books between the first two and the *Memoirs* seems to indicate is that he was writing without reverie. Those "springs," as Ellen Glasgow called them, had not had time to refill.

Last in the pile of books I had never before read came those presumably published in England either shortly before or after the *Memoirs—The Romanovs: Evocation of the Past as a Mirror for the Present* (1939), historical essays which bear some relationship to the recently published amalgamation of post-mortem material collected by Holroyd under the title *God's Fifth Column*[2]; *Eva's Apples* (1938), a novel published in England as *Jazz and Jasper,* the latter not mentioned in Holroyd's list of titles but possibly hiding under one or another of two titles I never obtained, *Doom* and *My Wife's*

2 Simon & Schuster, 1981

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the Least of It; and finally *Resurrection* (1934), a dream-polemic of a "novel" flying both high and low, and heartbreaking to read, as it must be read, as his severest and most hopeful judgment on his life.

Eva's Apples? After those first two, still a bad drop. Up to then all his experience seemed to have been seminal. Now, in spite of wayside wit and the often penetrating aperçu, it has slid to the level of the roman à clef, where one may natter on too long of people one actually knows, tending to cuddle their realistic semblance in the glee of having replicated it. Imagination might have been terser, and less chortling. Worst of all is when retaliation enters in. To tell it "like it was" in the spirit of injury is to leave all proportion and persona under that pinched aura. It's a long way from Proust.

Under the heading "Lord Beaverbrook turns his searchlight on me" we had read in the *Memoirs*:

> When a powerful newspaper proprietor who you had imagined to be an arch lowbrow who would dislike you, and whose name you had accordingly pooh-poohed . . . writes of his own accord inviting you to come and see him and then says "Look here, you're enormously brilliant and haven't had the success you deserve. We must do something about it" you melt, you shed tears of self-reproach, and you begin to love him. I was immediately fascinated by the man.

Though shortly the headings on Beaverbrook will read "Flattery is Not Enough," "Man of Thought and Man of Action," and "The Bismarck of the British Empire," Gerhardie will be unable to leave it there. "Lord Ottercove" will appear in book after book, as *éminence grise* and butt, symbolic friendly enemy and arch-curator of the world's goods and manipulations. *Eva's Apples* is narrated to him for the first sixty-nine pages: "Are you now talking or reading?" he asks, and Frank, the narrator, answers "Reading." After which Ottercove, in transitions as heavy as those in *The Polyglots* are prismatic, is untidily entangled as a character, marrying Frank's girl and finally, assumpted in his own chariot, disintegrating to a glowing cigar-point in that paper heaven where vengeful authors make the tycoons go. Yet on the way there are certain "new world" effects that anticipate later satirical science-fiction, while the alter-hero, one Christopher de Jones, and his entourage find a destiny which reminds one tonally, if not specifically, of *A Handful of Dust*.

It is with Eva, one more giddy extravaganza of a girl, that we realize how necessary it is for Gerhardie to keep his women separate from his intelligence, all the while boasting of his prowess in both directions. He is careful not to make it seem a sexual matter. He can prate of the clean-mindedness which comes of sex, or be funny in the consciously audacious 1920s style: "The sexual passages of *Lady Chatterley* are as highminded as you may aspire to below the hips" or "The greatest excesses are—or aren't?—committed in wedlock; and what is a bachelor's occasional night out compared to the married man's three hundred and sixty-five nights a year spent in sin?" Marriage and love long-term come in for similarly stylized cynicism. Yet he can dream that Katherine Mansfield (who though dying when he sent her the thirteen-times rejected manuscript of *Futility* got it publication) was one of the women with whom he could have been lastingly happy, "though she died before I could meet her." At the same time he can write: "Never yet have I committed the error of looking on women writers as serious fellow artists"; and on Wharton he could not resist being snide. Concomitantly, he is compelled to show himself the womanizer, in airily frangible milkmaid affairs he always terminates.

Meanwhile, though there is evidence men could find his intelligence too clinging, the male intellectual friend is a constant theme. In the *Memoirs,* "Hugh Kingsmill and I stimulated each other to such a pitch that after the first meeting he had a brainstorm and I lay sleepless all night and in the morning was on the brink of a nervous breakdown . . . . H. K., I realized, was the first

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man who stimulated my mind and exercised it to the full; that is a being to merit the term 'friend.'" He will have others, like John Holms, and the characters Bonzo and wife will become staples of the Gerhardie world. His heroines will rise to the romantic only as they rebuff. In compensation he will idealize them as the true embodiment of the namelessly desirable—which is why all of them are so much alike. Mundanity disqualifies them. The heroines of the womanizer, no matter what passages in bed, must all remain will-o'-the-wisp.

Dinah, in *Of Mortal Love,* does so by dying. One might smile, yet only the novel itself is more moving—as it should be—than the sight of so many costly rehearsals serenely converging toward a subject, object, and attitude at last nipped in perfect balance, with the narrator in his life-judged place. Engaged on the book since 1920, encouraged by Mansfield to continue it, he published a first version in 1936 and this revised edition in 1949, achieving a simple elegance he never had before, with all the familiar themes subdued, and some silent. The ice has finally broken up on the Neva; he is English now. His heroine is now very much the English *princesse lointaine,* part ruthless deb no matter her lineage, part faerie Oxbridge hanger-on to philosophers, part naïf out of all the nurseries of the golden-haired young men. The scenes at her home, though again with a mother and an aunt, have been transmuted, and Bonzo too, caustically yet lovingly rendered, reaches his apogee in death.

Real losses have tempered William Gerhardie, however you spell him, as they do us all. Our quest for the author has been rewarded, as it should be, by a fine book. Perhaps the choice of Dinah, in all her repetitions, has braked it slightly, but that this choice was not his to help is now consciously clear to him, as long since to us. Some can love on without waiting for loss; he is not one of them. Even humor, as he now knows, cannot be blamed. *Of Mortal Love* does not have the belling vibration of a great novel. But in its modulation between people and scene, humor and tristesse, and in an intellectual brilliance subduedly part of an expressive reality, it is a matchless one.

We can't quite end there. With Gerhardie one will always have to backtrack. *Resurrection* has echoes from all over literature, from *Urn Burial* forward. However we characterize its form, catching likenesses from Bulwer Lytton to some Book of the Dead in a game which could be as endless as the subject (a man who gets out of his own body), it reminds us that once Gerhardie gets past any professional jealousy he can be a relentlessly pure critic, the kind with a lodestone touch of the writer's alchemy—now trained on himself. These are the reflections which come post-autobiography, or crowd round it, in a dream-death. Addenda from the malcontent deprived of his just audience, the bad boy dreaming he watches his own bier, they are chock-a-block with intellectual power, if in a range which remains, God help us, more original than profound thinking should be. We have had malcontents faintly reminiscent of him in America—oddly enough the lady-barber's unlineaged by-blow, Edward Dahlberg, comes to mind. But like Dahlberg they lack the real fictional range and do best on the social order. Gerhardie, for all his worldly concerns, looks elsewhere for the final answers. "In this life we cannot truly associate . . . . Bonzo, the inner life is literature." That may or may not be so, and it may be that a writer ought to want everything—or try. *Resurrection,* embodying comments on writing which are pure indeed, is in essence the history of a book being written. In our hindsight it may seem to be aiming at that never to be extricated final one. He did not die until 1977.

"Why is everything?" little Harry asks the narrator George in *The Polyglots,* and the passage goes on:

> "By George! He was taking after me."
>
> "But why is it," he said "—everything?"
>
> I pondered for a moment, stuck for an answer, and then answered him:
>
> "Because . . . why shouldn't it be?"

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Perhaps that is why Gerhardie so repeats his effects. We shall be a long time considering their facets. I hope we can give him that resurrection. In return we shall be awarded that liberating sense given us by writers of worth no matter how unevenly encountered—that they live, and it is we who need to be waked.

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Art

The Avery retrospective

by Sanford Schwartz

The Milton Avery retrospective at the Whitney Museum[1] is overhung, yet when you leave you feel that you haven't seen enough, and that Avery himself has passed you by. You know you have been in the presence of a master, but you may leave feeling emptied-out and saddened, and confused as to why. The exhibition presents a different kind of bleakness from that encountered at the Whitney's mammoth 1980 Edward Hopper retrospective, where the painter pulled you into his mind and made you experience the day-in-and-day-out, sun-drenched pressure he lived with. Hopper's vision was crazier and more loving than might have been expected. He appeared to crave the massive loneliness he saw in Cape Cod houses, on New York streets, and elsewhere, and that made him less of a noble Puritan and more of a modern man, more of a New Yorker on a quest. Avery's tranquil seascapes, landscapes, and figure pieces don't make any attempt to pull you in, and you don't expect them to. Yet his art leaves a far more unsettling—and irritating—feeling than Hopper's does because Avery doesn't let us know what he loved or wanted. He seems deliberately to put a clamp on part of his spirit.

Avery isn't entirely responsible for the show's insistent blandness, though; part of that is due to the selection of works. Barbara Haskell, the exhibition's curator,[2] wants us mostly to see the lean, modern Avery, the painter celebrated chiefly by Clement Greenberg, in an influential 1957 article, and by Hilton Kramer, in a 1962 book and subsequently in a number of pieces. Their Avery is a dark horse who, moving on his own outside track, produced a large body of work that touches on and perhaps even brings together many of the most fought-for ideas of modern painting. For his most sympathetic critics, Avery's art, with its modest and gentle tone and homemade, untaught appearance, is a reverie that surprisingly links the goals of the masters of the School of Paris, who were the painter's elders, with the goals of some of the most advanced American painters of the Fifties and Sixties, who were his juniors.

Haskell has every right to favor this Avery —the artist of pure color—and it isn't as if there is an entirely different man waiting in the wings. Yet she has chosen too many works that make exactly the same point. And there are other pictures, especially from the period of the late Twenties to the late Thirties, when he was finding his voice, that she

1 "Milton Avery," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, September 16 to December 5. The exhibition will travel to museums in Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, Buffalo, Denver, and Minneapolis.

2 Barbara Haskell's catalogue for the exhibition is *Milton Avery,* published by The Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harper & Row, 224 pages, $29.95. (A paperback edition of the catalogue, available only at exhibiting museums, is $18.)

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might have included and that are livelier than many of those in the show. (A number of his early paintings are reproduced in Marla Price's catalogue for a 1981 exhibition at Bard College entitled *Milton Avery—Early and Late,* and in Adelyn Breeskin's lovingly designed little catalogue for The American Federation of Arts' 1960 retrospective.) In their murky and bumbling way, these pictures give the viewer what the Whitney's show makes him want most: a flesh-and-blood sense of who Avery himself was.

There is a veiled Expressionist force in Avery's early work. Marsden Hartley, who wrote about Avery's 1938 show at the Valentine Gallery, recognized the becalmed lyric simplicity, even humbleness, of his subject. But Hartley began his review by noting how "it was violently yes or no for this man" and by announcing that Avery's "two great esthetic forebears are James Ensor and Edvard Munch." (The review has recently appeared, for the first time, in a collection of Hartley's writings, *On Art* [Horizon Press, 1982].) Hartley didn't go very far with his reference to the earlier European masters—he went off characteristically into a prolonged aside on what the older artists meant, or failed to mean, to him. But he was on the right track in his opening comments, and his references to those specific painters were also astute. Such early Averys as *Nuns* or *The Circus,* which are in the Price and Breeskin catalogues but not in the Whitney's show, recall Ensor's and Munch's similar visions of life as a parade of masked people. Avery composed his early pictures in somewhat the same seemingly helter-skelter way Munch did, too, with a figure or object flat against the picture plane and the rest of the details in the picture reeling off on one perspective line or another.

Barbershop, of 1936, one of the best pieces at the Whitney, is also one of the few there that give a glimpse of how, as he was coming into his own, Avery painted people. With their bulging temples and high foreheads, and their eyes invariably lost in deep black shadows cast by brutish overhanging brows, the men in *Barbershop* have the bruised, insensate strength of bums or mental patients. The figures match his painting style of the time, which alternated, in passages in the same picture, from the nightmarish to the whimsical. Are these massive creatures cousins of the muscular heroes and heroines of the contemporaneous WPA murals? It's possible. (He participated in the projects for the briefest period, in 1938.) But it seems much likelier that Avery created these figures and faces as he worked.

Eyeless, slobbering, and sleepy, frequently wide-hipped, high-waisted, and thick-legged, these and his other ghouls feel as if they were the creations of a man imagining himself at his worst, and yet taking a kind of pride in it. The Neanderthalish men (and occasional women) epitomize the strangled strength of Avery's early work, which leaves the impression of a crushing force that has been tempered by a desire to be charming. Few of Avery's later, more characteristic, works have such an uncamouflaged, palpable sense of his sweetness, and of how his docility blended in with something abrupt and inexplicable. One of the oddest and most mesmerizing passages in any painting in the show is the cottony white area in *Barbershop,* which covers the barber and the man whose hair he's cutting up to their necks. It's one unbroken mound of fiery, delectable white paint, with the scantiest reference to the bodies and space beneath. Avery seems to have painted the mass of scumbled white because he was carried away; it felt right, and it has a poetic rightness for us.

Avery's early world may be called one man's view of the Depression. It was also an original, if never fully developed, view of life seen from the perspective of a hobo, a person who feels himself spiritually and emotionally blanked out, undernourished—who doesn't have a roof over his head and doesn't particularly want one. It is a gray-brown world. Not quite nocturnal, it has the vaguer, sadder darkness of a barely lit subway station. Color has an artificial, jewel-like quality in Avery's early art; it comes in

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unpredictable little flashes—it seems to be a relief from the overall drabness. That is how it is felt in *Barbershop,* where one man's face is a morose, pale algae green, another's is a flushed, hot pink-and-red, and the face of the third man, in the corner, is a dusky plum.

I don't think Avery ever lost the grayed, mumbly, old man's sadness of *Barbershop,* or the sense of color as a relief from something. He was, of course, an amazing colorist. And as he aged, he was able to be increasingly naturalistic with color. The 1952 *Shapes of Spring,* which is in the show, appears to be an image of a meadow, a cliff, banks of trees, and, possibly, a ravine. The viewer is drawn to it at first simply to decipher what's going on—it is an unusually nebulous image. But the viewer lingers with it because, after his eyes have adjusted to its unusually pale tones, the colors bring back so many memories of being in the country at a particular time of year. Its violet, assorted tans, and washed-out apple green convey the moment when there is as much warm, hazy, sweetish air in the filtered atmosphere as there is damp, icy air.

But Avery's soul, you feel, had little color in it. He didn't see the sensuous substance, juice, or gleam of color. He never painted light—not a light that gives off heat, anyway. One of his strengths is that his color invariably feels freshly invented for any given passage. But his inventiveness is itself a problem, because, in a way, it subtly devalues color. He had no personal allegiances to tonalities; there were no groups of colors that he had to keep returning to, to satisfy an inner need.

When Avery is at his best, which is, I believe, in the Forties, he isn't a gentle, lyric poet in paint, and he isn't such a sweet old guy, either. In what for me were the high points of the retrospective—*Morning Call, Portrait of Marsden Hartley, Seated Blonde, White Sea, Autumn, Oregon Coast,* and his large *Self Portrait*—he is a wily, cunning magician. With their hothouse, artificial colors and parodies of different kinds of drawing styles and surfaces, these works are summations not only of Avery but of a way of thinking about art that was shared by the most adventurous painters in New York for much of the Thirties and Forties. Along with such contemporaries of his as John Graham, Stuart Davis, Nicholas Vasilieff, Arshile Gorky, and Arnold Friedman, plus a few older men, notably Hartley and Eilshemius, Avery had a heightened respect for the formal qualities of his medium. These men had almost a reverence for the flatness of the picture plane. Yet, for us, the excitement of their art comes from seeing how they subvert their commitment, how they find ways to suggest a variety of depths.

Style-mad but cautious, working as students, essentially, because they had no real audience but each other, devoted to the lessons and rules of European art, especially the new art of Picasso and Matisse, these artists brought a self-consciousness to picture-making that has a great charm for our eyes. Radical New York painting of that period, and more conservative styles, such as Reginald Marsh's, seem as faraway and historical—and are as fun to look at—as Pompeiian wall painting, which they greatly resemble. Most of these men lost their schoolboyish and experimental manners; after their prolonged periods of maturing, they went on to freer, more muscular styles. Avery's art, too, gradually lost trace of the audacious loud colors, the parodies of different materials which he could do with oil, the cross-hatchings and rakings of the wet surface, the virtuoso displays of squiggles, dots, and smudges. Yet there was something about those circus-tent colors and that care for the surface—that ability to fuss and yet not have it seem manicured—that suited him to a tee.

His strongest pictures are the work of a brilliant, somewhat unconscious mechanic of painting, a man whose mental life is so filled by the techniques of the art he has seen that he never thinks to develop a life away from the job. He is a man who is so quick to see the world as a series of possible motifs that he bypasses the world itself. The hallucinatory *Oregon Coast,* perhaps his single most

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elegant and original picture, is the product of someone who is so absorbed by the way other artists render and use color, and who has so little desire to tell his audience how he himself feels when he sees this vista, that he ends up with a work that, perhaps without his being fully aware of it, makes a mockery of, and yet also pays homage to, traditional landscape painting. With its lunar airlessness, its sunless, blank, unradiant light, and its looming, rubbery shapes, which seem indebted to commercial animation, *Oregon Coast* is a monumental in-joke, a great piece of fluff. It may look more refined—more of a museum-piece—now than it did in the Forties, but its principal audience is the same: other painters and, especially, painting students, for whom Avery's tricks, which are so many shortcuts devised by a genius, are subtle spurs to get moving with one's own work.

Nothing Avery did later has the bucking, headstrong energy of the small number of powerhouse works from the Forties. Possibly this is because of illness. He had a heart attack in 1949, and, according to Haskell, he was given, at the time, no more than three years to live. He managed to live for sixteen, but he never fully enjoyed good health thereafter; his condition was always relatively fragile (he had a second major attack in 1960). Recuperating from the 1949 coronary, he turned to monoprints, which were less taxing physically and which paved the way for the washy, thin surfaces of his later oils. At the show, you don't sense his illness and suffering. Nor does it seem as if he is altering his approach to picture-making because he had only so much physical stamina. What is felt is that he is trying to go deeper; he seems to want to retrieve the muffled, private, more dimly lit mood of his earlier art. The paintings from the early Fifties take the longest time of any of his works to understand because Avery is trying to put more of himself in them, and he is also, expressively, losing something in the effort.

Particularly in *Sunset,* from 1952, and in *Green Sea, Green Seascape, Waterfall,* and *White Wave,* all from 1954, he seems to be remembering the world rather than grasping it. Although there are still creamy, glistening areas in these paintings—the whites in *Green Sea* are especially lovely, and also cracking—he rarely mixes areas of low relief with passages of flat color, as he did earlier; his tendency now is to keep the whole thing even, flat. He almost seems to want the effect of having the image exist underneath the surface.

He seems to be calling out to us, too, sending us coded messages. *Sunset,* a coastal scene, shows water pouring up over rocks and spilling down on sand. The image is quite naturalistic, yet the shape of the spilling water also suggests a human torso, with head down and arms outstretched, washed ashore. Avery may not have seen the shape this way himself. But the possibility occurs to the viewer, in part because *Sunset,* with its rubbed-down surface texture and seemingly water-soaked browns and oranges, is such a melancholy painting. Whether or not he saw that washed-up body, he suffused the picture with resignation. The shapes are all stubby, their edges are all ground smooth.

Avery's presence is even greater in *Sheep,* which is also from 1952. It has been left out of the retrospective, along with his liveliest other animal paintings, possibly because they're considered too cute or too whimsical. The few animal pictures that have been let in are of the most refined kind—those in which a flying bird, say, is less a personality on its own than an element in a quasi-abstract design. But Avery sometimes felt free to put more punch and more of himself in his images of animals than in those of people, and *Sheep* is perhaps his most memorable animal picture. It's a profile portrait of a single sheep, which sits with its legs drawn under it, so we don't see them. (There is a reproduction of the painting in faithful color in Bonnie Lee Grad's recent *Milton Avery* [Strathcona, 1981].) Self-contained, sitting on a slab of pinkish earth, with only an uninterrupted field of the palest baby blue above, the animal seems to be floating by us; yet we also feel its immobility.

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With its long black muzzle and cockeyed, elegantly simplified black ears, which are the only markings on its glancingly painted, all-white, compact body, it is a handsome creature. It has a Lancelot-like, sad beauty. It suggests Avery's own reserve and quiet good looks, seen in photographs of him, and also how drawn in on himself he may have been at this time.

Avery hit his most personal vein in the early Fifties, and he stayed there for the remaining twelve or so years of his working life. His art, from this time on, is more uniform in quality than it had been in the Thirties and Forties. Yet *Sheep* and the series of coastal pictures are as much a serene aftermath to something as a great new beginning. The resigned lyricism of these works is too clear-cut; their gracefully flowing, serenade-like spirit comes across too quickly and uninterruptedly. *Waterfall,* one of the most striking pictures of the time, shows a waterfall and a dark river surrounded on the top and side by branchless, barren, army-green trees, which are placed in a softly glowing, dull-orange earth. The mood of the image is very specific: we feel we're on an afternoon walk in the country in late November, when the day's dim light is fading fast and December and winter are in the air. Evocative as the color is, though, the picture leaves a graphic, linear aftertaste, perhaps because our eyes register the colors so evenly. The colors are too equal in density and force—no one hue is allowed to come forth more strongly than another. What dominates are the lines that contain the elements in the composition, and that makes the picture more cartoonish than it ought to be. Even in the more commanding *Green Sea,* color is subservient to line; the picture, which is five feet across, winds up seeming, in an odd way, the wrong size. We want the image to be either expanded, so the feeling can become truly majestic, or reduced in size and intensified. We feel we're seeing a stand-in for a painting.

His final works, the pictures from the late Fifties through the early Sixties, are even more disembodied. It has become customary to think that these large landscapes and seascapes, often of dunes, occasionally including bathers or birds, are the full flower of his art. (He continued intermittently to work with large sizes and with the same subjects into 1963.) Kramer and Greenberg felt that the late pictures, which include some figure pieces, put Avery on the map of world art; Haskell feels that too. She gives the paintings, most of which were made in Provincetown, an added layer of distinction because her research has shown that Avery was eight years older than has always been thought. He fudged to make things easier for everyone when, at thirty-nine, he began courting his bride-to-be, Sally Michel, who was in her early twenties. He was born in 1885, not 1893. That means that he was in his seventies when he began making pictures that are double, and sometimes more than double, the size of the canvases he had used for most of his career (he had worked with such large sizes a number of times in the late Twenties).

The late paintings look very good in reproduction, where the shapes expand and the colors appear to have carpety soft textures. But they are threadbare, parched objects. A case could be made for their rawness—the rawness might be said to reflect the impatience of old age. Like the seascapes Marin was doing in the late Forties and early Fifties, when he was in his late seventies and early eighties, Avery's last works have a brusque freedom, a disregard for nicety. They might be called, too, his ultimate statements about how he saw things. No other paintings of his show how comfortable he was with aloneness and emptiness. But they are a fulfillment of the way he handled paint and saw the world in the same hollow way that Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is the fulfillment of how he used words and saw people. Avery's late seaside paintings have the same unresonant barrenness that Hemingway's tale does. The paintings are the work of a man who is so alone in his feelings he isn't even in his pictures.

Five and six feet on a side, and often made up of the most elementally reduced images

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of dunes, sea, and sky, they ought to be expansive, presiding works; but they eat up surprisingly little wall space. They appear smaller than their literal size. Placed together at the Whitney, these twenty or so pictures have the weight of magnified cards. After looking at one or two close up, you don't feel the need to go up to any more of them. It seems enough to stand in a corner and take in all of them at once. They don't convey a sense of so many different experiences. And the sameness of texture of all of them makes them unexpectedly illustrational. They feel to be so many products.

In her catalogue, Barbara Haskell talks about the relative poverty of Avery's background. He came from an old but, by the time he was born, working-class family in upstate New York. When he was in his early teens, the family moved to an area near East Hartford, Connecticut. By 1915, when he was thirty, his father, his two brothers, and his sister's husband had died, leaving Avery, who had long been working in local factories and as a clerk, to singlehandedly support the family that remained—his mother, his sister and her daughters, and his widowed sister-in-law and her daughter. His sister had five daughters, which means that from 1915 to 1925, when he finally moved to New York, he was living with and supporting nine women. More unbelievable is that, throughout the twenty-odd years when he was grabbing jobs wherever he could, he was also assiduously studying painting and drawing in different Hartford art schools. He worked on the night shift for one five-year stretch, at an insurance company, so he could paint during the day. When he married Sally Michel in 1926, she undertook to support the two of them and, later, their daughter March, born in 1932. Michel had wanted to be a painter, but, after their marriage, she turned much of her energy toward professional illustrating; her art work was published regularly in *The New York Times Magazine,* among other places. Her efforts kept the family afloat during the many years when Avery didn't sell or when, as was more often the case, he sold at prices that couldn't by themselves have supported a family of three.

With or without his wife's help, though, Avery probably would have found ways to keep painting. Haskell notes that he never lost the industriousness of his Hartford days, or his "will to paint." And in the Thirties and Forties, and even after that, when few people were buying unfamiliar new American pictures, Avery's unfinicky, journeyman's approach is reported to have been a source of inspiration to fellow artists. His composure, coupled with his expertise and awareness of what was going on in Paris, must have been taken by colleagues, especially the most ambitious younger ones, such as Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, who were close friends of his in the Thirties, as a sign of the eventual professionalization of serious art in New York. Avery had the same major-league, no-nonsense attitude as Matisse and Picasso. He wasn't the only pro on the scene but, by his example, he helped remove American art from the realm of inspiration and gifted amateurishness that theatrical figures such as Whistler, Henri, and Stieglitz had put it in (though these men were themselves maniacs for work). Avery was a crucial influence in making younger painters see that art could be like business, and, at the time, that was a sustaining, even poetic, idea. His imperturbableness must have been one of the reasons why Hartley, who despaired over his own picky temperament, was drawn to him.

Yet Avery had some crushing lessons drilled into him during all those years in Hartford; there is a reason why his earliest personal pictures are of such blunted, shadowed souls. In some way, he is our Braque. He didn't work on the heights Braque attained, yet each was innately stylish, kept up with every change in the painting of his time, and developed the ideas about light, scale, and color that were embedded in his earliest work. And each thought of himself too unquestioningly as a worker in the fields of art. There is more drudgery than spontaneity behind Avery's vast output.

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He seems to bat out one picture after another not because, like Matisse, he's always trying out a new thought, or because, like Picasso, his vanity calls for it, but because he's afraid to stop production.

He is a hard man to knock, because he helped introduce so many new things into American art. Not only was his professionalism reassuring to his contemporaries, it was in advance of its time. It wasn't until the Sixties that New York artists sought to operate with his same cool consistency. Somewhat like Dubuffet, he showed, too, how an artist could base a lifetime of work on a seemingly spontaneous, childlike drawing style. And without consciously setting out to do so, he brought an emotional softness into the arena of New York art. In *Morning Call,* say, which is of a young woman in a housecoat talking on the phone, he made a Parisian theme and image seem American.

Yet his achievements feel like bargains, half-way measures. He made women one of his constant subjects, but he never quite lets us know what he feels about them. The strongest painting he ever made of a woman, *Woman with Green Face,* from 1932, shows his wife drawing (or possibly writing a letter). From the color reproductions of it (it isn't in the show), this image of a woman with a dark green face, black helmet-like hair, and the tiniest white lips, which stick out the way lips do in some African masks, is the closest he got to making a piece of pure primitive art. To judge by the pictures in the show and by those that have been reproduced, he never made anything quite like it again. He leaped, in his work, to another terrain, where women are ever-present but, as forces, blobbed out. He seems to paint them over and over so that, on some other level of feeling, outside his work, he won't have to deal with them.

His pictures aren't sexy. Maybe this is what makes the viewer feel drained but never engaged at the show. Perhaps it's the lack of sex in his work that has made the writers who admire him treat him so protectively. It is said by his admirers that he is shy about proclaiming his gifts; but what it feels like is that there are equal amounts of mousiness and ruthlessness in him, and each holds the other in check. He never quite flaunted his intuitive skills as a colorist and designer; he never became cavalier about his talents, and you feel you ought to praise him for that. His honesty is more palpable than many artists'. It is felt in his slightly tremulous contour lines, his muzzy, indistinct colors, his childlike way of plunking down shapes. But his hand is too noticeably honest. His sincerity comes to feel ostentatious, a deliberate blunting of his virtuosity. We are conscious of his sincerity in a way that we're not conscious of, say, Matisse's, where such a virtue is beside the point.

There were times when he let loose. Two of the strongest pictures at the Whitney are his large, standing *Self Portrait,* from 1941, and the *Portrait of Marsden Hartley,* from 1943. But even in his *Self Portrait,* Avery pulls back. His face, the lower half of which is outlined in an unexpected, uncharacteristic black, has a sluggish, wary, vaguely threatening but likable power, and his barreling, prole's body is more physically there, before the viewer, than any other body he painted. There is something luscious and aggressive, too, about the way he has painted his undulating purple and green striped shirt. But Avery dampens all this with a view into a bathroom, which takes up a third of the picture. In no other passage does his approach seem, in such a detrimental and irritating way, so childlike and crude. He's almost self-consciously abashed in his painting of the bathroom and the comb, brush, cup, and faucets; with his wobbly rendering, he's asking us not to take the picture that seriously. He is undercutting the presentation of his own virility.

With Hartley, though, he wasn't monitoring his flow. In a footnote, Haskell says that Avery never showed Hartley the finished work. Avery told Nat Halper, the owner of the HCE Gallery in Provincetown, that he, Avery, felt Hartley would be upset by how much of his feminine nature was brought out in it. This is the most revealing and

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intimate remark of Avery's to appear in any writing about him. It is the only time where he talks about something ordinary, physical, and human, and expresses an awareness of other people's feelings. Avery may have believed he was doing something risky or naughty in emphasizing what to him were Hartley's feminine qualities; maybe that is why he felt compelled to be more purely representational and unstyled than he generally was. Attempting to do justice to the crags and gullies of his friend's face, he became unusually sculptural and monumental. Hartley's face appears marble cold and perspiry at the same time. The features seem ready to cave in or to be engorged at the touch.

Sexier and worldlier than any other picture in the exhibition, the *Hartley* is also the most melancholic and resigned. Yet it isn't dispiriting or emasculated, as so much of Avery is. Avery's flatness and elimination of detail—in this case, of the suit Hartley wears—is spooky and witty. In memory, the painting is as replete as the most formal ancestor or chairman-of-the-board portrait. It's Avery's wit to make us think we remember details that aren't there.

Already in 1944, Margaret Breuning, in a review, called Avery an "institution"—probably because he was prolific, influenced other artists, and showed regularly, sometimes in prominent galleries. In the nearly forty years since, the situation hasn't changed much. Avery is still an institution, and he is still standing just outside the gates of fame. The Whitney's is the fourth good-sized, nationally touring retrospective he has had in four decades. Like the others, it has been undertaken in the spirit of dispelling doubts; its point is that, if we look, we will finally see that he is a classic figure. Haskell's assumption is that that has happened, and she may be right. For some, her show, plus her authoritative catalogue—and Grad's picture book, one of the most handsomely produced volumes on an American artist that has come out in recent years—will mark the end of his shifting fortunes. Certainly he is a bigger figure now than he was in 1970, when the retrospective organized by the National Collection sailed quietly in and out of the Brooklyn Museum.

Yet Avery may always be in the position he was in in 1938, when Hartley talked about him as a good man who would never get into the spotlight. Perhaps he will always seem most commanding—and most real, as a person—when he's thought of as an underdog, an artist who tells you how to get to the Promised Land but won't set out for it himself. There is something valiant and self-sacrificing about the way he dilutes his adeptness with his naïveté. It is as if he is willing to have us see something in art even if it is at an expense to himself. He is most exciting to people when they are encountering modern art for the first time, I believe, because he suffuses the texture of modern art at its most sophisticated with the trustworthiness of folk art and children's art. Hartley's, Greenberg's, and Kramer's, writings on him have a welcoming warmth—their essays radiate more warmth than Avery's art does. These men write as if to usher a long-suffering, never very familiar, long-lost uncle back into the family's midst. If Avery's work continues to be unfocused and unfamiliar, though, it may be because he doesn't allow us to be truly familiar or intimate with him. During his life he was a son, a lover, a husband, and a father, but when he painted he was that long-lost uncle.

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Music

Opera appreciation, Metropolitan-style

by Samuel Lipman

Just because so little new creation of high musical art is currently visible, the efforts of performing institutions are increasingly turned toward the more or less distant past. But while such efforts undeniably have the easy virtue of concentrating on the "greats," they present a dilemma as well: How can a knowing and participant audience be found for the cultural products of another time and, as in the case of our country, another place?

This dilemma clearly affects no institution on the American artistic scene more poignantly than the Metropolitan Opera. Well on its way to a one-hundred-million-dollar annual budget, the Met has forsaken the cause not only of contemporary operatic composition but even of production. Instead the company has chosen to spend its talent and treasure on the presentation of hallowed works—or occasionally of lesser-known works by hallowed composers. These works are to be produced, it is clear, in a manner going no further in innovation than a bright re-creation of the originally intended style.

But evidently an audience for even this safe museological task cannot be taken for granted, and given the desirability of expanding audience figures for company image and for fundraising, this audience must be both large and patently enthusiastic. So little faith does the Met have in this happening by itself that it has little choice but to add yet one more dimension to its already assiduous marketing scheme: "education." It has attempted to teach its audience many times before, primarily through its radio (and television) broadcasts and their intermission features, and through its publication, *Opera News*. Now a new teaching method is being tried, a method that brings together in book form material on an individual opera, ranging from the libretto and its translation to historical essays, a plot summary, photographs, a discography and bibliography, and, most innovatively, a retelling of the opera's story by a major—or at least famous—author.

The subject of the Met's first attempt in this new line is Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910). A success on its premiere in Dresden in 1911, it was first done by the Metropolitan in 1913, the same year as its first performance in London. Since then it has been performed countless times all over the world, and has become known as a solid favorite of audiences everywhere. *Der Rosenkavalier* is one of the major attractions in the Met's especially conventional 1982-83 season, and the release of the present guidebook is timed to coincide with the Public Broadcasting Service's "Live from the Met" telecast of the opera.[1] In line with the Met's general marketing philosophy of making

1 Richard Strauss, *Der Rosenkavalier*; libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, story adaptation by Anthony Burgess. The Metropolitan Opera Classics Library, Little, Brown and Company, 204 pages.

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something saleable for every purse, the book is available in three versions: paperback at $8.95, hardcover at $16.95, and a deluxe edition at $75.

One should begin with the good news first. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's magnificent libretto, a spicy mélange of romantic German sentiment and cosy Viennese sentimentality, is included in a reasonably readable format. From here on everything in the guidebook is downhill.

The translation of the libretto, for example, is the dated and even originally inadequate 1912 version of Alfred Kalisch, an early English Straussian. Kalisch's staid rendering, which remains the official translation of Strauss's publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, has here been updated to remove some of the old-fashioned English diction which so disfigured Kalisch's work. But the unaccountable substitution of "Mignon" for "Quinquin," the lover's endearment by which the Marschallin calls Octavian throughout Act I, is retained, for reasons no more persuasive than were those involved in the original substitution.

There is here a wider loss of literal meaning as well. Thus the first four lines of the libretto, which in the original German read

Octavian: Wie du warst! Wie du bist!
Das weiss niemand, das ahnt keiner!

Marschallin: Beklagt Er sich über das, Quinquin?
Möcht Er, dass viele das wüssten?

is given in the neo-Kalisch translation as

Octavian: All thy soul, all thy heart—
None can measure their perfection.

Princess: Why grieve so sorely at that, Mignon?
Should it be known on the housetops?

It hardly seems necessary to point out that the original German contains no mention, not only of Mignon, but of such words as "soul," "heart," "perfection," and "housetops." Whatever the merit of these words—and of the concepts which they denote—there is no reason to think their addition is a service to Hofmannsthal's original creation or to its understanding by an unsophisticated reader.

Present too, in the Kalisch translation—both old and revised—is a kind of bowdlerization which hardly seems necessary in today's world or faithful to a work of art. At the end of Act I, for example, Octavian, realizing that the affair with the Marschallin is at an end, says, *Soll dass heissen, dass ich Sie nie mehr / werd' küssen dürfen, bis Ihr der Atem ausgeht?* Kalisch palely renders this erotic description as "Does it mean that never again—no, never, / I shall kiss you—kiss you in endless rapture?"

There is, fortunately, evidence that a rather more literal—and therefore more informative—version is possible. A translation of the *Rosenkavalier* play, which the poet published separately from the libretto, was included in volume three of the Bollingen *Selected Writings* of Hofmannsthal. This version, by Christopher Holme, has virtues both of plainness and fidelity. The opening lines, for example, are rendered as

Octavian: What you were! What you are!
No one can know, no one can guess!

Princess: Is that a complaint? Would my Quinquin prefer that many knew it?

And the sensual lines so misrepresented by Kalisch are given by Holme simply and accurately as "Does that mean I shall never again / be allowed to kiss you till / you gasp for air?"

No work of music appreciation would be complete without written material telling the reader what he ought to like and why he ought to like it. In the Met guidebook this function is assumed by George Marek, former RCA record executive and record columnist for *Good Housekeeping* and the writer of a worshipful biography of Beethoven and a hostile one of Strauss. For the Met book, Marek has written two pieces, one an

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"Introduction" to the opera and the other a "Re-evaluation" of Strauss and Hofmannsthal. It is difficult to think that either essay will increase a neophyte's comprehension or enjoyment of the opera.

About *Der Rosenkavalier* itself, Marek is by turns lowbrow and dismissive. He asks, in the best style of cookery magazines, "Can anybody resist this inundating feast of melody?" Then, after praising the high points of the work, he goes on to savage Strauss's creation:

> *Der Rosenkavalier* is too long. Worse, at certain moments the music is too fulsome and boisterous and grandiloquent. At others—stretches of the second act and the beginning of the third—it coasts.

So plain are these words that Marek's continuation

> But the defects of the opera can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Its joy remains intact after a lifetime of hearing . . .

can only seem lame and inexplicable. He nowhere can account for the opera's strength in the face of what he sees as its defects, except in terms of peremptory and superficial judgments. Ignored, for example, is the whole question of just why the opera's most salacious feature—the casting of the Marschallin's seventeen-year-old lover as a female role—produces in us an effect not of disgust but rather of charm and even virtue.

When Marek turns to Strauss and Hofmannsthal as artists, this same combination of ambivalence and poorly grounded summary opinion is again in evidence. He admits that Strauss wrote "enough to assure [him] an important place in music's living repertoire"—but his list of what will live unaccountably fails to mention the towering and refined masterpiece of the composer's very old age, the *Metamorphosen* for twenty-three solo strings of 1944-45. Perhaps this work was left out because it ill accords with Marek's judgment of Richard Strauss as a musician:

> For such music [the works Marek thinks will last] we are willing to accept the blots that spot even his best conceptions, a touch of vulgarity—indeed more than a touch—an occasional sugariness of melody and harmony, a tumult noisier than the thought warrants, and here and there polyphonic nodules . . . .

From these dicta it is a short jump indeed to some remarkably negative judgments on the permanent value of the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration. For Marek, *Der Rosenkavalier* almost says it all:

> In more aspects than one, *Der Rosenkavalier* marks the apogee of Strauss's operatic creations. *Ariadne auf Naxos* may equal it in charm—it is Hofmannsthal's best libretto—but not in full musical satisfaction. Its end, from the entrance of Bacchus, is a disaster. But Act I and most of Act II are unmitigated joy.[2] Not so *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: the libretto is sesquipedalian with various symbolisms clashing all over the place. *Die aegyptische Helena* is even less convincing, and *Arabella* is a rehash of *Der Rosenkavalier,* where one has to wait until the third act to hear truly fine music.

But all this, I am afraid, is little more than mere like or dislike. To these preferences can easily be opposed other, and perhaps more detailed, opinions. The end of *Ariadne,* though monstrously difficult to perform, is a brilliantly successful example of Wagner's conception of "endless melody." And the first act of *Arabella* contains such touching and beautifully made music as Arabella's *Er ist der Richtige nicht für mich!* and the subsequent duet passage with Zdenka.

Having found Strauss lacking as a composer, and having judged the collaboration with Hofmannsthal to have produced only

2 A reader might be forgiven here for feeling some worry that Marek has gotten hold of the wrong opera. *Ariadne* is indeed composed of two parts but they are not "acts"; in the score the work is described as *Oper in einem Aufzug nebst einem Vorspiel*—in English, "Opera in one act with a prologue."

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one first-class, albeit flawed, work, Marek is scarcely inconsistent when he passes a negative verdict on Hofmannsthal as a writer. He asks a question, and then answers it:

> Was he a great writer? I think not. His lack of clarity, his inchoate mysticism, and a touch of theatricality in his verses prevented him from being more than a minor, though a fine-grained talent.

But to ground this opinion Marek fails to quote any of Hofmannsthal's great poetry; he fails to mention the *fin-de-siècle* classic of literary self-doubt, the *Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902); he ignores the epic fairytale *The Woman without a Shadow* (1919), a companion to the libretto for Strauss's opera. And he even passes over the very poetry of the Strauss operas for which Hofmannsthal wrote the words. Thus there is no recognition of the great literary merit in the Marschallin's monologues on time in *Rosenkavalier*; unremarked by Marek go the ineffably moving (and in German lyrically tender) lines of Octavian about the defenseless Sophie in Act II of the opera:

> Mit Ihren Augen voll Tränen
> kommt Sie zu mir, damit Sie sich beklagt.
> Vor Angst muss Sie an mich sich lehnen,
> Ihr armes Herz ist ganz verzagt . . .
>
> [With her eyes full of tears
> she comes to me to complain.
> In fear she leans on me,
> her poor young heart is quite hopeless . . .][3]

To accompany the text of the guidebook, there are photographs of famous productions of the past in Europe, and of the current production at the Met as well. The photographs of the past are interesting evidence of how anchored to that past the present production is. The discography, adequate as far as it goes, lacks listings of so-called pirate records; thus missing is the George Szell performance at Salzburg in 1949, an important document of how a great modern conductor dealt with this complex score. Missing also from the list of recorded excerpts is the extraordinary performance of the Act III trio by Viorica Ursuleac (Strauss's favorite soprano), Tiana Lemnitz, and Erna Berger; on the other side of this 78 RPM disc[4] is a ravishing account of the concluding duet by Lemnitz and Berger. Both sides are conducted magnificently by Clemens Krauss, Strauss's librettist for *Capriccio*. The bibliography, though containing many important items, lacks material on Hofmannsthal: missing is mention of the other two volumes in the Bollingen selection from Hofmannsthal, the *Poems and Verse Plays* and the *Selected Prose*. Missing too is any listing of the short works on the author by Lowell A. Bangerter and by Hanns Hammelmann, both entitled *Hugo von Hofmannsthal*.

However undistinguished the material I have so far discussed may be, it is passably earnest and no doubt well-meaning; it is rarely meretricious. But that word is unfortunately the only one which can be applied to Anthony Burgess's vulgar, coarse, cheap, and ill-written attempt to do for the ignorant what Hofmannsthal did for the cultivated audience he knew. Using many of the lines from the opera as dialogue[5] and the stage directions as descriptive material, Burgess shows that what was once done supremely well can be neither improved

3 Because the Holme translation is of Hofmannsthal's play rather than of the libretto Strauss used for musical purposes, these words do not appear therein. I have therefore used the Walter Legge version, which is included in the Schwarzkopf-Karajan recording for EMI/Angel.

4 The original appearance of these performances was on Deutsche Grammophon 67075; according to Alan Jefferson in *Opera on Record*, they also appeared on LP as Discophilia KG Ul.

5 Strangely, Burgess seems to base his dialogue not on the original German but on the Kalisch translation: thus he uses Mignon instead of Quinquin; like Kalisch, he uses the word "perfection" at the beginning of the story, though it does not appear in Hofmannsthal.

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upon nor even simplified. What began with Hofmannsthal in lyric poetry thus ends with Burgess in leaden prose, all wrapped in the lineaments of philosophy.

Burgess's first lines are a disquisition on history—the kind of disquisition which is all wool and a truism wide. To read it is to recognize the genre:

> History is always the past. We never live through history. When we are old, we discover to our surprise that we *have* lived through it. When we die we join it.

But as Burgess starts to talk about the Marschallin and Octavian as lovers, he quickly jettisons the philosophy:

> Of the movements of history the lovers knew nothing and cared less. The movements of their own bodies were of greater interest.

As with history, so with passion; on the next page we find the mood more Noel Coward's bright brittleness than Hofmannsthal's intended gentle spoof on *Tristan und Isolde*:

> There was nothing effeminate in his lovemaking. "But when I say *you,*" he was saying as he dressed swiftly, "and speak of your this and that, I'm just as foolish as when I say *I.* The words have no meaning. We lose our identities in love and become one being."
>
> "Which means," said the Princess, "that I may not say *I love you.* But I say it. I say it now."

When Burgess gets around to describing Baron Ochs, Strauss and Hofmannsthal's somehow likable comic villain, we are treated to a touch of merrie England at its most repulsive:

> His belly was more than Falstaffian: it denoted heavy dinners and heavy bevers before and after them. He would have looked more presentable with a Falstaffian beard, but this was an age of clean shaves and wigs. His nose was a maimed beacon: its red shine was marred by the lumps of good living and a wart on the left-hand slope that sported three filaments which waved in the breeze of his bark. His eyes of a sharp blue were couched in fat.

It seems ironic that poetry as beautiful as that of Hofmannsthal should be represented to an unsuspecting public by a writer capable of such clumsiness and confusion as the following description:

> Then there came in Ochs's breakfast, on a tray borne by one of the Baron's own men, an ill-favored starveling with a faint squint . . . . He [Ochs] pointed to a low square stool: he would pick at it later when this mob had gone.

Can this be from the pen that wrote myriad articles in the *Times Literary Supplement,* and even *A Clockwork Orange*?

As the retelling proceeds, the Marschallin ages, Sophie falls in love with Octavian and Octavian with her, the Baron is undone, and the Marschallin gives way to the new reality of love between coevals. But as Burgess tells the story, we have little of the majesty of the Marschallin, the innocence of Sophie, or the maturity of Octavian. Instead we have pasteboard characters and maudlin situations undercut even in their sentimentality by a trite and superficial cynicism never present in Hofmannsthal. Thus when the Marschallin is describing to Octavian her vague presentiments of the future at the end of Act I, Burgess has her say "We're in a banal situation—something out of a play so bad it makes the spectators yawn."

The final proof of Burgess's failure either to penetrate the story himself or to communicate it is clear at the end, where he slides over the emotions so magnificently presented in the great Act III trio. The Marschallin's resignation, Octavian's transport of love, Sophie's consciousness of wonder and surrender—all this is simply eliminated and Burgess is content with describing the famous concluding episode, in which the little black boy runs across an empty stage to pick up Sophie's dropped handkerchief, as the result of Sophie's having "had the makings of a thrifty housekeeper." O romance, O magic, O art!

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Nor is Burgess content to leave matters here. The last paragraph but one tells what happened to the characters after the opera ends.

> Octavian lost a leg and an eye in the war of the Austrian Succession. Sophia died bearing her second child. The widowed Princess entered a nunnery. Baron Ochs married the richest heiress of all Austria and died at ninety-one in his bed. Or, if you wish, none of these things happened.

And the final paragraph makes clear the whole thing isn't worth a hill of beans: "'It would,' Sophia's father sometimes said, 'have made a rather good comic opera.'"

What are we to make of this effort at music appreciation which contains not one note of musical example? What are we to make of a discussion of the work of a great poet and writer which contains little of his own material and no appreciation of what he wrote? What are we to make of this hack retelling by a popular novelist of a glorious masterwork of European civilization? And what are we to make of the sponsorship of all this by one of America's greatest artistic institutions, which is also one of the world's half-dozen or so greatest opera companies?

The answer seems inescapable. This unworthy production is the result of replacing the goals of art by those of institutional survival and expansion. By this book, the Metropolitan Opera has amply demonstrated that its interest is neither in a living new culture nor in the preservation of a distinguished older one.[6] It has demonstrated, too, a nihilistic lack of faith in the ability of its audience to appreciate and demand art. There will be those who will try to explain the present failure as a democratic degeneration, some loss of taste consequent on the granting of the franchise to a mass citizenry. But the matter is far simpler. It is the old story of the corruption of the weak by ambition, money, and power. It will be tempting to blame all this merely on the artistic personnel of the Metropolitan. To do so would be most unfairly to ignore the fact that the company is run by the board, and by the administrators. Theirs is the decision, and theirs is the shame.

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6 As if to make clear that this project is no one-time event, the publicity release announcing the *Rosenkavalier* book ends with the ominous words "future volumes in the Metropolitan Opera Classics Library series will include a story adaptation of 'La Traviata' by Mary McCarthy and 'La Bohème' by V. S. Pritchett."

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Architecture

Neutra and the International Style

by William H. Jordy

Of all the modern American houses from the first half of the twentieth century probably the most familiar are Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie house and his Falling Water. But, after these, Richard Neutra's house for Dr. Philip Lovell in the Los Angeles hills is probably best known. With its paper-thin, white walls, extravagantly punctuated with metal-framed glass, it strikingly epitomizes what is now frequently referred to as the "heroic" moment in modern architecture.

In the recent exhibition of Neutra's architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, organized by Arthur Drexler and Thomas Hines and timed to coincide with the publication of Hines's splendid, full-scale study of Neutra's career,[1] grainy blow-ups of the original photographs of the Lovell house suggest with special intensity its effect at the time. They show the house when it stood isolated on its still almost uninhabited, precipitous desert hillside above Hollywood. There was no lush foliage then to ease it into its surroundings, just coarse scrub and bare sandy ground.

The hardness of the setting complemented the sinewy means by which Neutra made the house. Appropriately so, because a vigorous client called it into being. In true California style, Dr. Lovell specialized in the curative powers of exercise and natural foods. Gymnasia were essential aspects of both his house and office (also by Neutra). In his daily column for *The Los Angeles Times,* Dr. Lovell publicized its exercise equipment, its swimming pool, its sleeping porches, its glass walls and terracing. Upon its completion in 1929, he invited his readers to visit the "Health House," as he called it, with Neutra in attendance, on four successive open-house weekends. Fifteen thousand of the curious (and furious, no doubt, as well) came to peer at the crisp lineaments of the "future." No house of the time—and this was the *right* time—could have more spectacularly performed the public-relations functions desired by both client and architect.

The famous side elevation of the Lovell House is immediately evident as one climbs the hill, providing a diagrammatic view of it. Entered at the top of the hill, the house steps down the slope. Each stratum of use is marked by parapet-high, white concrete-surfaced ribbon walls, which fit into the slope at one side and thrust tautly from it on the other. From the entrance and bedrooms at the top, one descends an impressive staircase to the main living area, then to a cantilevered, reinforced-concrete tray, which holds the swimming pool, and then finally to the bottom of the stepped garden made by the scoop of the terrain.

1 "The Architecture of Richard Neutra: From International Style to California Modern," Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 24 to October 12. Thomas Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture,* Oxford University Press, 356 pages, $49.95.

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From the tray for the swimming pool rises the light metal frame, its narrow column intervals giving it marked verticality against the horizontal ribboning that lightly clings to it. Extravagantly glazed, the frame creates the narrow, up-ended rectangular box which contains the house, its rectangularity fully asserted, however, only at the cornice. Below the roof fascia, the box erodes, especially at the downhill corner over the swimming pool, so that it steps back irregularly in accord with the modular bays of the frame, responding in three dimensions to the two-dimensional stepping down and folding in of the parapet bands.

Neutra's manipulation of the modular grid doubtless owes something to Wright's concrete-block houses in Los Angeles, with which Neutra was very familiar; it derives, too, from the work of Neutra's one-time collaborator and later rival, Rudolph Schindler, who handled form in a similar way. Because the outer layer of Neutra's eroded box was hung from the roof and not supported from the ground, the frame partly supports (toward the core of the house), partly hangs (toward the periphery). Here is the ultimate subtlety of Neutra's frame. Like a man-made wisteria, it rises up and spills out.

Nestled into the site, yet set against it, the Lovell house burst on the consciousness of its initial visitors with something of the dramatic, romantic, visionary effect that Wright's later (and complexly related) Falling Water achieved, at once revolutionary and popular.

The Lovell house joined Howe and Lescaze's skyscraper for the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society in the 1932 "Modern Architects" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, at which Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson publicly initiated the then radical notion of a full-fledged department of architecture and design within a museum. Except for the Lovell house and the Philadelphia skyscraper (there was, too, a peripheral section devoted to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright), the American showing at this exhibition was slim indeed. It featured modern European buildings in order to rouse Americans to what was truly "modern," in contrast to what was merely decoratively "moderne." In the title of the publication which followed the exhibition, the curators used the phrase they had decided to apply to the works in their survey, *The International Style*. They acknowledged that Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum, had suggested the phrase in an effort to elevate the perceived style above the materialism suggested by such tags as "Functional" or "Machine," or the transitoriness suggested by "Modern." Barr opened his preface to Hitchcock and Johnson's survey with the ringing assertion that "there exists today a modern style as original, as consistent, as logical, and as widely distributed as any in the past. The authors have called it the International Style."

Fifty years later the Lovell house has appropriately returned to MOMA. No longer the herald of things to come, it appears in the current "postmodernist" context as one of the familiar images and attitudes supposedly gone the way of "modernism," verging on the passé yet also haunting. But how, exactly?

Superficially, of course, the Lovell house can be viewed as simply one more cardinal historical image to be consumed in the present eclectic moment, something to be added to the bits and pieces of other buildings by architects like Palladio, Piranesi, Soane, Ledoux, Schinkel, Lutyens, and Le Corbusier. In such a way does the "postmodernist" concoct his allusive stew. And while the pot simmers, why *not* add a dash of Neutra's Lovell house as well?

The Lovell house has always figured importantly among the buildings in the International Style created from 1926 to 1932, the years during which the style achieved its full realization. But the Lovell house differs markedly from the others. The reason stems in part from Neutra's American experience. Neutra arrived in the United States in 1923, a Viennese émigré. He was enthralled by the steel frame construction of the American skyscraper and by the work of

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Frank Lloyd Wright. During his first few years in America he experienced both approaches to architecture firsthand, working for the Chicago firm of Holabird and Roche on steel-framed skeletal buildings and then, briefly, at Taliesin, for Wright. (He recounts both episodes in the books on his American experience which he sent back for publication to Europe during the Twenties, *Wie Baut Amerika?* [1927] and *Amerika: Die Stilbildung Des Neuen Bauens in Den Vereinigten Staaten* [1930].) Both approaches influenced the Lovell house. The steel frame appeared directly; Wright appeared in the interwoven, fabric-like quality of the warp of the columns against the woof of the ribboning. These themes characterize the whole of Neutra's architecture: revealed structure is the basis for design, but in interwoven configurations.

Unlike the European examples of the International Style, the Lovell house offers relatively little that is geometrically "pure." Around the same time, Mies had etherealized the structure of his Barcelona Pavilion into planes, lines, and points. But Neutra used the structure of the steel frame bluntly, for what it is. And the Lovell house no more than distantly acknowledges those neo-Platonic cubes, cones, cylinders, spheres, pyramids, and ideal parallelepipeds toward which Le Corbusier's designs gravitated, forms considered to be "beautiful" because they were "so easily comprehended." Only when the Lovell house thrusts out at its top story—recalling the rectangular "prism pur" that Le Corbusier used for his Savoye house—do we sense genuine closeness to the European International Style, and Neutra's design appears to have come first. Moreover, Neutra immediately repudiated this association, whittling away the "prism pur" into the eroded corner of the structure, which uses the skeletal frame as an architectural jungle gym (appropriately enough, in this instance) for the modular manipulation and complication of the environment.

At the opposite (entrance) end of the upper part of the Lovell house the rectangular prism pur that contains the building is completed as a pergola-like frame; it stands within the confines of the geometry but "outside" the house contained by the geometry. Both uses suggest the environmental, contextual, and complicating manner in which the more abstractly and structurally inclined architects at the present time, like Peter Eisenman or Richard Meier, have diverged from the International Style, literally eroding their prototypes in alluding to that ruinous state which is particularly congenial to the fragmentary sensibilities of the current architectural scene.

Because of Neutra's admirable concern for the technological and environmental aspects of architecture—and his willingness to adapt his designs to an informal and outdoor California style of life—he never repeated the compelling image of his Lovell house. In a way, it was the penalty he paid for his suspicion of the European emphasis on a modern architecture of "pure forms." Hence, his numerous houses, scattered throughout the Los Angeles sprawl (and elsewhere in the United States and Europe), offer little of the kind of striking image with which the Lovell house initiated his career. Some appear as simple boxes with the usual glass walls, window bands, and plain surfaces, interesting only for some technological nicety of detailing. Others appear—even as they disappear into the surrounding lush foliage—as open pavilions, with prominent, low spreading roof planes (Wright again) supported on widely spaced posts. In the constructivist manner, by which overtly revealed discrete architectural elements come together to "make" the building, the frame of posts and beams in Neutra's designs is visually distinct from the roof slab. It is something of a Neutra hallmark that frame and post can often be found well outside the edges of the roof plane, especially at the corners of his houses (spider legs, Hines calls them), in order to float the roof and intensify the merging of house and landscape. To the same end he used mitred glass corners and strategically placed mirrored walls, or ran roof gutters well beyond the eaves. He employed a constantly enlarged

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and continuously refined series of interchangeable, standard details for his houses. Unfortunately, neither the exhibition nor the book does them full justice.

In the Forties, Neutra increasingly gave his exquisitely refined, high-tech detailing more rugged treatment, turning to masonry, rough wood, and bulkier concrete by way of warming the "coldness" of modern architecture. But the change was not consistent, and his later high-tech treatment rarely possesses the same degree of conviction as his earlier, which may have stemmed from his admiration for the extraordinary refinement of detail in the work of Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and Josef Hoffmann. Neutra's best drawings make explicit this commitment to refinement; the meticulously thin pencil or ink lines seem to posit not so much a building as its diagram. In most of these, this disembodied ghost appears, enchantingly, surrounded by a doily of stylized ornamental foliage straight out of Gustav Klimt. No architect associated with the International Style gave more attention to landscape than Neutra. Like his characteristic drawings, his photographs tell us much about Neutra's intentions: they are not photographs of whole buildings, but of roof planes and structural outriggings that overrun transparent and reflecting glass corners, all ambiguously complicating the boundary between house and landscape, almost as though the house were the mirage of its setting.

These are serious concerns that transcend the formalistic emphasis of so many of the "stars" of the International Style. To generalize on Neutra's accomplishments: His expressive means focused on the building component as basic to architectural design. Some backsliding notwithstanding, he kept these components under constant scrutiny, making changes and refinements in accord with evolving building technology—employing progressive "state of the art" technology rather than the projective technology of, say, Buckminster Fuller. He devised as well means by which his architecture interacted in a direct, intimate, and complex way with its natural environment. He realized these aims in a prodigious number of buildings, many of substantial quality. Finally, his major contributions at every rung of the economic ladder, from subsidized public housing and budget custom building to the most extravagant dream houses, all derived from the same architectural principles. This is no mean accomplishment. One wonders whether it is really matched in the work of other leaders of the International Style.

Still, there is a serious flaw. The Lovell house excepted, Neutra's designs are not quite memorable. Not even his biggest houses, like the Kauffman house in Palm Springs, the Tremaine house in Santa Barbara, or the Brown house on Fishers Island in New York, stay in the mind as vivid images. One sees the first two in pieces—splendid pavilions, exquisitely detailed, lavishly open to gardens and landscape, wonderful to experience but ultimately elusive as diagrams lost to their environment. The third (burned to the ground in 1975) was, to be sure, extremely visible on its scrubby island site, but its interminable runs of well-detailed casement windows and sliding plate glass doors appeared without the significant incident, variation, or focus that makes one feel a unique architectural presence.

Neutra's ultimate weakness may have been in plan. In a functional sense Neutra's plans are well conceived. Most of his clients praise the ease and convenience of living in his spaces. But plan as shape, as the generator of a decisive shape in elevation and mass, was not part of his sensibility. His one truly memorable elevation—the Lovell house—seems to promise an equally exciting interior. But there is nothing so dramatic. The entrance at the top gives onto an ample but conventional hall, the hall onto the rather spectacular stair down to the living area, which spreads in a comfortable, amorphous manner, without decisive shape or focus. What should be the focus—an outsized Wrightian fireplace in masonry anachronistic to this sleek technological setting—occurs at the foot of the stairs with no more than an

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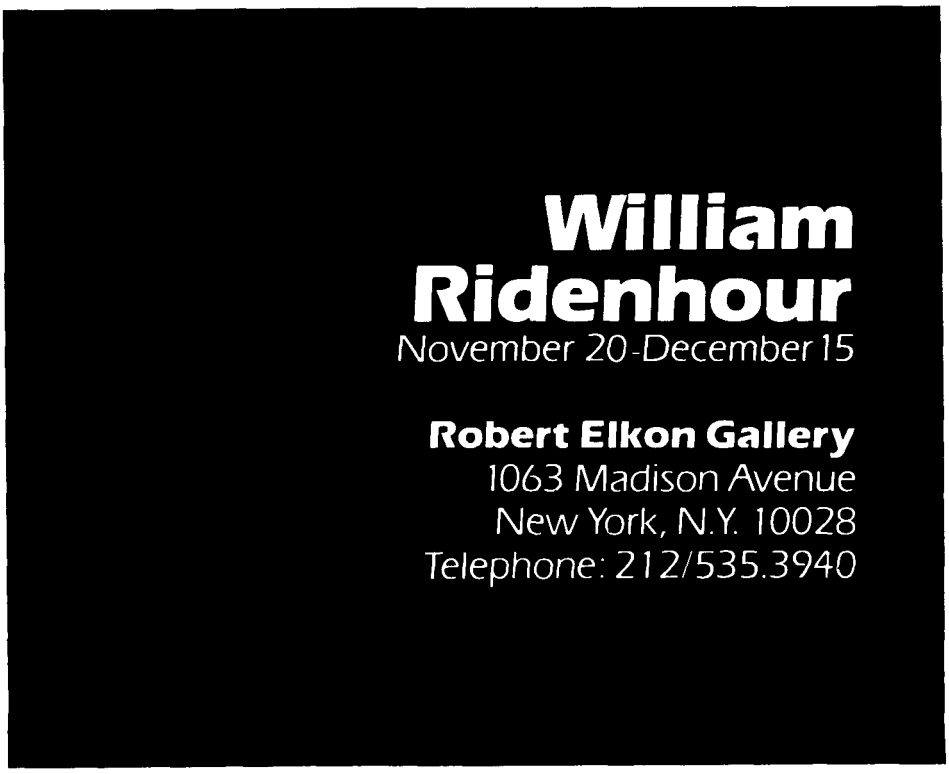
incidental relationship to the seating area.

Indeed, many of the living areas of Neutra's houses, like those in Wright's Usonian houses, seem to be half rooms, one wall butted into the steep Los Angeles hillsides, the other spilling out through floor-to-ceiling glass doors onto the terrace. Why concentrate on creating memorable shapes for living rooms when the best part of living escapes to the terracing outside? Where there is no memorable form for space, there cannot be memorable public architecture. Thus, the curators of the MOMA exhibition wisely emphasized Neutra's houses and only his finest public housing. From his public and commercial buildings they chose only his influential "open air" schools. In these, rows of classroom boxes open directly onto rows of outdoor gardens and play courts, thereby reaffirming the natural tendency of Neutra's planning.

But make no mistake about it, Neutra's achievements are considerable. He is bound to influence future architecture in diverse ways now that Hines and Drexler have made his career visible in a comprehensive way. Of all the Americans who participated in making the modern movement during the pioneering decades prior to the Second World War, it is Neutra who expressed the ideals of International Style modernism and yet transformed them into an unmistakably personal statement. More than any other early modern houses with a consistent revolutionary intent, either here or abroad, Neutra's foretold the manner in which the polemical moment of elitist modernism would eventually be popularized.



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Books

Camus and his critics

by Norman Podhoretz

Are we in for a Camus revival? The indications are that we may be. Only three years after the appearance of Herbert R. Lottman's massive *Albert Camus: A Biography,* we find ourselves presented with yet another biography, this one entitled simply *Camus,* by a British specialist in French literature named Patrick McCarthy who now teaches in the United States.[1] Conor Cruise O'Brien, the influence of whose own critical monograph on Camus[2] (published in 1970) is evident everywhere in McCarthy's book, has repaid the compliment by praising it as "the best comprehensive study of Camus in English." Yet while claiming to deal with "Camus's life, work, and times," McCarthy is so stingy with biographical detail and so niggardly in his account of the historical and cultural context in which Camus's life and work took shape that no one depending on him alone would be able to make much sense of the story. For that Lottman is a far better source. Like many biographers nowadays, he tells us more than we perhaps need or want to know, but this is on the whole preferable to not being told enough. On the other hand, Lottman neither is nor pretends to be a literary critic, whereas McCarthy is nothing if not critical. His real purpose, in fact, is to determine "what remains of Camus" as a writer. Here then is his judgment:

> Although he wrote a great deal, only a small part of his work remains alive. He was a bad philosopher and he has little to tell us about politics. His plays are wooden even if his novels are superb.

Quite apart from the question of whether this admirably blunt statement is true, it represents an interesting turn in Camus's reputation. When he was killed in an automobile accident in 1960 at the age of forty-seven, Camus was still widely regarded less as a great novelist than as a kind of secular saint, the moral conscience of his generation. This is not to say that his novels lacked for admiration and acclaim. His first, *The Stranger,* published in 1942 when he was in his late twenties, had been a great critical success (earning the admiration of, among many others, Jean-Paul Sartre, who would famously become first his close friend and then his great antagonist). Five years later Camus's second novel, *The Plague,* achieved not only critical acclaim but an enormous commercial success all over the world; and so too did his third, and last, novel, *The Fall* (1956).

Yet when, a year after *The Fall* came out, Camus won the Nobel Prize for literature, it was not taken either by him or by anyone else as a tribute to his greatness as a novelist.

1 *Camus,* by Patrick McCarthy. Random House, 386 pages, $17.95. Herbert R. Lottman's biography was published by Doubleday in 1979 ($16.95), and in paperback by Braziller in 1981 ($8.95).

2 *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa,* Viking Press.

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Nor would it have occurred either to him or to most of his admirers that his stature rested entirely or even largely on what was after all still a relatively slight body of fiction (to be supplemented later only by a collection of stories entitled *Exile and the Kingdom*). However highly those three novels might have been esteemed, it was not in the least self-evident that they could by themselves bear the weight of the tribute paid to Camus in the Nobel citation—that he "illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our time." As though implicitly acknowledging this, Camus in his acceptance speech talked much more about the political duty of the writer—"to fight for freedom and to resist oppression"—than about cultural or aesthetic issues. "I cannot," he said, "live as a person without my art. And yet I have never set that art above everything else."

Neither did Camus's admirers. For them he was, to begin with, a great hero of the Resistance: the man who had edited the legendary underground newspaper *Combat* during the Nazi occupation of France. Indeed, *The Plague,* published in 1947, owed at least some of its great popularity to the fact that it was intended, and understood, as an allegory of the Resistance.

In addition to being a celebrated wartime hero, Camus was one of the most influential voices in the intellectual life of the postwar years. In what O'Brien calls "the loose literary and journalistic terminology of the period . . . in which existentialism meant finding life meaningless but finding reasons for carrying on all the same," Camus was bracketed with Sartre as an existentialist. Though he objected to this description of his philosophy, and though he may have been right on technical grounds to distinguish between Sartre's existentialism and his own "absurdist" perspective as developed in his long essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the difference between the two was not easily apparent to the naked eye.

In any case, Camus the philosopher (or perhaps intellectual would be the better term) was valued by his contemporaries for the struggle he conducted against the nihilism of modern thought. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide": so runs the very first sentence of *The Myth of Sisyphus.* For if God is dead, as Nietzsche had proclaimed, and the universe has no meaning, why go on living? The "solution" to this problem, Camus says, is a "metaphysical revolt" against the religious illusions of divine purpose on the one side and despair at the absurd truth on the other. What is left after the death of God "is a destiny of which only the end is predetermined. Apart from this single predetermined fact of death, all, joy or happiness, is freedom. A world remains of which man is the sole master."

The effect this affirmation (which was echoed in novelistic terms in *The Stranger*) had on Camus's own contemporaries is summed up nicely by O'Brien:

> To a generation which saw no reason for hope it offered hope without reason. It offered a category—the absurd—in which logical, psychological, philosophical and even social and political difficulties could be encapsulated and it allowed the joy of being alive, in the presence of death, to emerge.

Finally, there was Camus the political thinker. Unlike his other roles as Resistance hero and as philosopher, his participation in the political debates of the postwar period brought Camus a great deal of animosity. On the two major issues that most concerned him—Algeria (where he was born into a working-class French family) and Communism (he had been a member of the Communist party for a few years in the Thirties)—he took positions that were extremely unpopular in his own intellectual circle. On Algeria he was a reformist rather than a radical, specifically refusing to side with the terrorists of the FLN who were fighting for independence from France. "I have always denounced terrorism," he once said. "I must also denounce a terrorism which is exercised blindly, in the streets of Algiers for example, and which some day

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could strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I shall defend my mother above justice."

This attitude certainly won Camus no friends in the cafés of St. Germain des Pres and other gathering places of the Parisian intelligentsia. But possibly because he had so clear a personal stake in the matter, his apostasy from the regnant orthodoxy on Algeria, if not exactly overlooked, did not lead to his excommunication from Parisian literary society.

His anti-Communism, by contrast, was unforgivable, as he discovered when *The Rebel* was published in 1951. In that book Camus developed a densely reasoned and historically grounded case against the actual political manifestations of the metaphysical nihilism he had dealt with in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In arguing that the quest for a political solution to the absurdity or meaninglessness of the human condition invariably led to slavery and mass murder, Camus in *The Rebel* was of course attacking Communism as an ideology and its bloody practical consequences in the Soviet Union. For doing that, neither his previously unimpeachable credentials as a man of the Left nor his close personal friendship with Sartre could save him from assault in the pages of Sartre's own magazine, *Les Temps modernes,* first by a young critic named Francis Jeanson and then, in answer to a protesting letter from Camus, by Sartre himself. The controversy became world famous, and though most of Paris sided with Sartre, Camus had his supporters in other countries, especially the United States. Both *Partisan Review* and *Commentary,* for example, published accounts of the controversy which were sympathetic to Camus and harshly critical of Sartre's avowedly pro-Soviet position. Thus, while Camus's political stance severely damaged his reputation at home, it undoubtedly added to his already growing stature in other countries as a man of conscience and a moral hero.

Like O'Brien before him, McCarthy is hostile to Camus's political writings and especially *The Rebel.* Its form, he says, is weak, it "distorts or neglects the thinkers [it] discusses," its language is "monotonously high-flown," and even its one merit ("a long rhetorical lament on the religious conception of politics which flourished from the 30's to the 50's") amounts to nothing more than "an important banality." Clearly, however, it is the anti-Communism of *The Rebel* rather than its intellectual or literary failings that lies behind McCarthy's harsh critical judgment. Without entirely siding with Sartre (as O'Brien wholeheartedly does), he views Camus from the perspective for which, alas, no more graceful term than anti-anti-Communism has ever been found. From that perspective, he easily dismisses *The Rebel* as "yet another chapter in the 'God-that-failed' saga."

Given this bias against anti-Communism, McCarthy obviously cannot accept Camus as the "conscience" of his time. And indeed, he challenges the whole idea of Camus as a secular saint. "Retrospectively the tributes paid to him seem ridiculous . . . . He was not, for example, the Resistance warrior his admirers thought him," and he did not take the morally correct position on the Algerian war. The case for a revival of interest in Camus therefore comes back for McCarthy and those who share his perspective (O'Brien among them) to Camus the novelist.

The problem is that such a case is hard to make in strictly aesthetic or formalistic terms. In fact, it is virtually impossible even to talk about Camus's novels without reference to the philosophical and political issues with which he was above all else concerned. In saying this, I can point for confirmation to Camus's journals, where he explicitly spoke of each of his novels as one panel in a series of triptychs, with a play and a philosophical work comprising the other two. Thus *The Stranger* he coupled with *Caligula* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* under the rubric "Absurd"; the "Revolt" trilogy was made up of *The Plague, The Rebel,* and *The Just Assassins*; and *The Fall* was evidently to form part of yet another series on the theme of "Judgment."

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In other words, Camus conceived of his imaginative works as dramatizations of the same ideas he was grappling with in his discursive writings. So much is this true of his plays that it robs them of any life of their own; and, in any event, despite his lifelong obsession with the theater, Camus simply had no gift for it.

He did, however, have a considerable gift for fiction. In contrast to his plays, which are merely schematic illustrations of abstract ideas, his novels do take on a certain life of their own. They are lyrically evocative, they have enough narrative drive to carry the reader along, and they set off intriguing vibrations and resonances in the mind. Nevertheless, they are the novels of an intellectual, not the novels of a novelist, which is to say that they remain umbilically tied to the ideas whose creatures they so clearly are, never breaking free to establish themselves as autonomous works of art. Under the stringent control of an imperious intellect, these are tight little works, clenched and ungiving: even the longest and most leisurely of them, *The Plague,* yields no great abundance of character or incident or social detail. There are a few colorful portraits in *The Plague* and there are several dutiful sketches of the social milieu, but nothing approaching the anatomy of a city struck by a sudden calamity that Camus evidently intends to produce and that his material itself requires.

The Stranger and *The Fall* also offer highly colored characters who are nevertheless unrealized and unconvincing. Meursault, the hero (or anti-hero) of *The Stranger,* is endowed with vivid external attributes, but is it really possible to believe in, let alone be engaged by, a character so affectless that he decides to marry a woman he scarcely knows or cares about because "it had no importance really," and who then shoots and kills a man because "one might fire, or not fire—and it would come to absolutely the same thing"?

Admittedly, a great many readers have been engaged and even fascinated by Meursault. But this is not, I would suggest, because he becomes real to them as (to take two very different murderers in fiction) Raskolnikov becomes real in *Crime and Punishment* or Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy.* Raskolnikov is a Russian of a particular time and place whose ideas are a crucial element in his behavior; Meursault is a fictional contrivance whose behavior is a function of ideas in the mind of Camus. Clyde Griffiths is an American whose passions are so recognizable and so convincingly associated with the world in which he lives that the murder he eventually commits is believable both psychologically and sociologically: we accept it not only as a tragedy but as an *American* tragedy. If Meursault is believable at all, it is as a clinical psychopath, and if he carries any wider significance, it arises not from within the novel but almost entirely from the outside—in the idea that the psychopath is the representative modern man (a notion later espoused enthusiastically by Norman Mailer).

If the murder Meursault commits can only be understood with the help of ideas outside the novel itself, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the narrator-hero of *The Fall,* is full of explanations of his own history. Yet if anything these explanations only serve to make that history less plausible. Why has Clamence thrown away a successful legal practice as a defender of widows and orphans, and a life full of comforts and prestige, to become a semi-criminal hanging around a dockside bar in Amsterdam? Mainly, it seems, because in failing to try to rescue a woman who had jumped off a bridge in Paris one night, he had come face to face with his own hypocrisy as a great lover of justice. Now, even apart from the fact that this incident has nothing to do with justice (it is actually about courage), Clamence's response to it would still remain a piece of hollow self-dramatization. Yet Camus takes it seriously and clearly expects us to take it seriously.

If there is a critical case for these novels, then, it has to rest on their standing as fables or allegories. Yet even as such, they are less

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than fully satisfying. If we take *The Stranger* at Camus's word as a fable of metaphysical rebellion against the absurd, we immediately run into a host of problems. To begin with, it is hard to see in Meursault an adequate expression of the defiant attitude he is presumably supposed to represent. He is, of course, defiant in relation to the consolations of religion, which he adamantly refuses, but far from achieving freedom and mastery of the world, he becomes a kind of automaton; far from finding happiness in the simple pleasures of life, he enjoys nothing except swimming; and far from resisting suicide, he in effect commits it indirectly in the way he goes to his death.

The best that can be said for Meursault is that he exemplifies not a rebellion against nihilism but the condition itself. Moreover, despite Camus's evident intention, he represents not the moral consequences of nihilism that Dostoyevsky feared most of all ("If God is dead, everything is permitted") but rather the spiritual effects stressed by Nietzsche when he said that with the death of God everything has become *weightless*. Meursault kills not because the prohibition against murder has in effect been lifted; he kills because murder, like everything else in life, has become inconsequential to him. He is as indifferent to the shedding of blood as he is to the death of his mother or to the woman he agrees to marry or finally to his own death. Such power as *The Stranger* possesses derives from the horror of this image of a life totally without meaning or affect. But Camus had other ideas and they were given their head to the detriment of what was most promising in his own material.

The Plague presents an even more interesting problem. O'Brien calls it "a great allegorical sermon" about the occupation of France and the Resistance, and McCarthy confirms that this is both what Camus intended and how the book was read when it first came out. But if we stop to ask what a city in the grip of plague has in common with a country occupied by an invading army, the answer would seem to be very little. The one is a natural calamity and as such

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morally and politically neutral; the other is a human phenomenon and is entirely moral and political in character. The significance of this point becomes immediately clear when we recall that whereas no one could possibly welcome or live happily with an outbreak of plague, a certain number of Frenchmen did welcome the Nazis and a much larger number were quite content with the occupation. To put the point bluntly, while there can be no collaborators in a plague, there were plenty of collaborators with the Nazis.

This is also why it is conversely hard to accept Dr. Rieux and his band "as a group of resistants who are fighting against the overwhelming power of the Nazis" (McCarthy). To fight the Nazis took courage and even heroism, but since on the evidence of the novel itself "fighting" the plague evidently involved no greater danger of infection than remaining passive, Camus's attribution of courage to the doctor and his helpers seems puzzling.

But no more and no less puzzling, one might say, than the entire myth of the Resistance in general and of Camus's own role in particular, to which *The Plague* made so notable a contribution. For as a number of recent books have been demonstrating to anyone still under the spell of this myth, the Resistance in France amounted to very little until a short time before the end of the war. Camus himself joined *Combat* only eight months before the liberation of Paris. Previously he had agreed to the elimination of a chapter on Kafka from *The Myth of Sisyphus* because a book celebrating a Jewish writer would not get by the German censors. But in doing this Camus did no more than most of the other intellectuals who were celebrated and celebrated themselves as heroes of the Resistance. Being anti-Nazi did not prevent Sartre, for example, from publishing books and putting on plays under the occupation—works which were not only passed by the Nazi censor but enthusiastically received by him. This did not make Sartre a collaborator, but it did not exactly make him a Resistance hero, either.

To be sure, Sartre was associated with the clandestine National Committee of Writers, but the only action of this committee mentioned by either McCarthy or Lottman (both of whom agree, incidentally, that it was dominated by the Communists) was the permission it gave Simone de Beauvoir to "accept the Goncourt Academy's prize if it were voted to her for her first novel . . . ." No doubt the committee did other things as well. Yet it is not easy to escape the impression that no great danger or heroism was involved in joining it.

As for Camus's clandestine activities in *Combat,* we get a good idea of what they entailed in the way of risk when Lottman follows an uncritically admiring account of them with the remark: "After the foregoing, it will be more difficult than ever to persuade the reader that during the same period in which Camus was helping to publish the underground edition of *Combat* . . . he was also making his debut as a playwright in the Paris theater."

With this background in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Camus could only write about the Nazi occupation and the Resistance in allegorical terms. Confronting it directly in a realistic mode would have required facing up to the element of (shall we say?) the absurd—the word applies here with cruel accuracy—in the idea that the French, and especially the French intellectuals, acted nobly and bravely during the occupation. A few of course did; a few writers even refused to publish under the German occupation, regarding it as a form of collaboration to submit to Nazi censorship. But only a relative handful of Frenchmen joined the Resistance until the point when an Allied victory seemed assured, and most anti-Nazi writers persuaded themselves that publishing under the occupation was a form of resistance rather than of collaboration. They may well have been right. But heroic they most certainly were not.

In treating the entire episode allegorically, Camus was able to take refuge from such issues in the posturing rhetoric that is

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for many of us the least attractive feature of the French intellectual style. But in translating the occupation into an outbreak of plague, and thereby inevitably making nonsense of the idea of heroic resistance, was Camus half-consciously struggling to tell himself, and the world, the truth?

I think he was, and I also suspect that *The Fall* should be read as part of the same struggle to achieve honesty (which is, after all, the only true heroism of a writer as a writer). Clamence has been interpreted by some critics as a satirical portrait of "Sartre and other progressive intellectuals," which would make *The Fall* an attack on the hypocrisy of their professed concern for the poor and the oppressed. I agree with O'Brien and McCarthy in rejecting this view, but I do not agree with them in seeing *The Fall* as a reflection of Camus's feelings about Algeria. Since *The Fall* is the only one of Camus's novels not set in Algeria, this interpretation forces O'Brien into the tortured argument that the very absence of Algeria from the book makes it "painfully present." Yet Clamence lives in the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam, which he himself calls "the site of one of the greatest crimes in history." Consequently, it seems more plausible to associate *The Fall* not, as O'Brien in his obsession with the problem of colonialism would wish, with Algeria, but with the issues raised by *The Plague*. Clamence's confessions of cowardice and hypocrisy, that is, may perhaps be taken as the expression of a higher stage in his creator's progress toward a more truthful account of the behavior of French intellectuals under the Nazis than as a reflection of Camus's supposedly troubled conscience over Algeria.

I say supposedly because of all the issues that engaged Camus, the one on which he had least reason to accuse himself of cowardice and hypocrisy was Algeria. For he was morally courageous in holding out against the enormous pressures on him to support the FLN, and he was intellectually courageous in telling the truth about his reasons. When he declared that he chose his mother above justice, he was, as O'Brien

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puts it, choosing "his own tribe" against an abstract ideal of universal justice. A greater heresy against the dogmas of the Left is hard to imagine, and in committing it he may have earned the reproaches of his literary friends, but he did nothing to earn his own.

In denying that *The Fall* is about Algeria, I do not mean to argue that it is mainly about the myth of the Resistance. What is it about then? The title, the name of the hero, and many details scattered throughout suggest that Camus is talking here about religion rather than politics. O'Brien says *The Fall* is "profoundly Christian . . . above all in its pervasive message that it is only through the full recognition of our sinful nature that we can hope for grace." Camus himself endorsed this interpretation when O'Brien offered it in a review of the novel at the time of its publication. But one can only say that if this was Camus's intention, the novel he actually wrote failed to realize it. For it is impossible to make coherent sense of *The Fall* as a Christian allegory. Clamence has nothing in common with John the Baptist except his name and his fall has nothing in common with the biblical fall. Unintegrated into the narrative, the Christian imagery becomes merely arbitrary; it is a means of pretending to a level of significance and profundity that the novel itself as a novel—or even as a fable—does nothing to earn.

My own view is that *The Fall* does indeed reflect Camus's great debate with Sartre, but that in the figure of Clamence, Camus is primarily attacking himself rather than Sartre "and other progressive intellectuals." Certainly there are many similarities between Clamence and his creator. As the herald of the great new age of freedom and justice he had envisaged in his *Combat* editorials, Camus could easily be seen as a kind of John the Baptist, and like Clamence he had prospered mightily (in reputation and with women) in this role. But like Clamence too he eventually discovered that he lacked the courage to risk everything in the fight for freedom and against the forces of slavery, and as a punishment for remaining "neutral in the quarrel between God and Satan" he was now condemning himself to a life in limbo as a "judge-penitent."

But is it true that Camus saw the struggle between the Western democracies and the Soviet Union as equivalent to "the quarrel between God and Satan"? And did he really see himself as neutral? That he regarded Communism as satanic is clear from *The Rebel,* but it is equally clear that he did not regard the bourgeois democracies as godlike. Like so many intellectuals then, and now, he could give wholehearted support only to some alternative possibility which did not yet exist. He was, that is, a utopian. Yet, unlike many intellectuals then, and now, Camus also understood that utopianism was the main spiritual source of the murderous totalitarianism embodied in the Soviet Union and therefore the modern secular equivalent of satanism. As Sartre and Jeanson rightly charged, the logic of this analysis led directly to a pro-American position, and in trying to escape that logic Camus was presuming to speak as (in Jeanson's words) "the High Priest of Absolute Morality." A choice had to be made within the historical realm: Sartre for his part, and despite regrets and misgivings, chose the Soviet Union and was not afraid to say so; Camus in effect chose the United States and *was* afraid to say so.

What I am suggesting is that Camus believed in his heart that this attack on him was valid, and that the cowardice and hypocrisy of which he accuses himself in *The Fall* are the cowardice and hypocrisy involved in his failure to side as clearly with the democracies as Sartre was siding with the Communists—and all for fear of being dismissed as a man of the "Right" and thereby losing his standing as a secular saint. "If, finally, truth seemed to me on the Right," Camus defiantly declared, "I would be there." Yet the truths of *The Rebel* were on the whole the truths of the "Right," as that term was understood by all concerned in this debate, and Camus was *not* there. Indeed, when Jeanson taunted him with the fact that "right-wing" reviewers had praised *The*

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Rebel, Camus, instead of asserting that in this case that was where truth was, justified himself by pointing to the criticisms made of him by the Right, and he counterattacked by hurling the dread epithet "bourgeois" at Jeanson (an accusation Sartre promptly hurled back at him).

It was, I would guess, because of all this shying away from commitment that Camus castigated himself as neutral; and this it was too that made him a "penitent." But he also remained a "judge," and while castigating himself he continued to condemn Sartre (of whom he was surely thinking when he wrote the passage in which Clamence ridicules the "atheistic novelist" whose "satanism is virtuous").

Although this interpretation makes, I believe, more sense than any other, no more than any other does it establish *The Fall* as a work of art autonomously dramatizing and enacting its own meanings. As the allegorical detail in *The Plague* serves to obscure the truth about the occupation, so the Christian symbolism here both obfuscates Clamence's confession and provides Camus with a pretentious way to avoid the full and rigorous accounting with himself he so desperately needed and wanted to undertake.

Writing at the height of the radical fevers of the late Sixties, and in "horror at the sight of the moral capital of *La Peste* [The Plague] being drawn on in support of the values of the Cold War," O'Brien nevertheless praised Camus the artist who, he claimed, "both flinched from the realities of his position . . . and also explored with increasing subtlety and honesty the nature and consequences of his flinching." In other words, Camus's novels indicate that if he had lived he would have given up on anti-Communism and moved to the Left. (In this same period, Mary McCarthy tried to discredit another great hero of anti-Communism, George Orwell, by claiming that if he had lived he would have moved to the Right.)

Today, as Patrick McCarthy tells us disapprovingly, Camus is being extolled in France by a new generation "as the man who resisted Communist pressure during the Cold War and who attacked the Russian concentration camps in language that Solzhenitsyn would repeat," while Sartre is denounced "as too Marxist, too pro-Communist and too dogmatic." Once again, then, it has become necessary to deprive the anti-Communist cause of Camus, and once again his novels—puffed up and misread—are brought in to do the job. But whereas in 1970 O'Brien interpreted the novels as the record of Camus's growing disillusion with the political values of *The Rebel,* McCarthy (who also dismisses *The Rebel* as Camus's "worst book") reads the novels as an escape into the loftier realms of art from those "dreary, angry controversies" with Sartre and others that poor Camus had to "put up with."

The truth is almost exactly the opposite of this. With all his faults, and with all its faults, the best of Camus is in *The Rebel.* His novels, moreover, are the record not of a growing disillusion with, or transcendence of, the convictions expressed in that book, or in the controversy with Sartre, but of an unsuccessful struggle to summon up the full courage of those convictions. If, then, there is to be a Camus revival in this country, the Camus who should be revived is the one to whom justice is finally being done in France: the Camus of *The Rebel,* not the travesty urged upon us first by O'Brien and now by McCarthy in the name of art but in the actual service of their anti-anti-Communist political passions.

Sontag vs. Sontag

Susan Sontag A Susan Sontag Reader. Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 446 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Michael Vannoy Adams

A Susan Sontag Reader consists of the author's own selection of the work she has published over the last two decades. A retro-

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spective exhibition, as it were, it affords an opportunity to survey the development of a career and to evaluate the "content" (a word that Susan Sontag summarily dismisses from critical discourse) of a representative sample of what she evidently considers to be the best work she has done. It would be easy to characterize Sontag as a product of the countercultural protest of the 1960s. These were the years during which Sontag suddenly emerged as a critic whose opinions on virtually everything seemed to matter. She spoke to the immediate concerns of the decade in a "style" (a word whose value she inflated out of all proportion) that appealed directly to the spirit of the times; in doing so she achieved a reputation and a certain notoriety. But it would be too simple to identify Sontag as a period piece and leave it at that. The decade of the 1960s was hardly as monolithic as it may have seemed; moreover, the times have changed, and Sontag has changed with them.

At about the same time that Sontag was writing "Against Interpretation," E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a professor of English at the University of Virginia, was writing *Validity in Interpretation.*[1] It would be difficult to imagine two critics more different, one who calls interpretation "the revenge of the intellect upon the world" and one who sees it as the quintessential task of the critic. Although Hirsch never mentions Sontag by name, in effect he rebuts what she has to say about critical interpretation. Hirsch is instructive in a general way as well. He cautions critics not to commit "the fallacy of the homogeneous past," by which he means the tendency to categorize a period (say, the 1960s) by personality type (say, the anti-intellectual) and then, by circular logic, to categorize a particular person (say, Susan Sontag) by period. As Richard Hofstadter observed at the very moment that Sontag first became an influence on the New York literary scene, anti-intellectualism of one variety or another has been a constant factor in American life. "Those who have suddenly become aware of it," Hofstadter wrote, "assume that anti-intellectualism is a new force in this or that area of life, and that, being a product of recent conditions, it may be expected to grow to overwhelming proportions." The anti-intellectualism of the 1960s was different and more alarming only in that it was, paradoxically and perversely, intellectuals who encouraged it.

To that extent, however, Sontag was a sign of the times. She did epitomize the "radical will" of the 1960s; she was the intellectuals' anti-intellectual. In "Against Interpretation" (1964), the essay that provided the title of her first book of criticism, Sontag advocates a "mindless" approach to art. At the very end of that essay she says, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." We are urged to experience the form of art sensually, rather than interpret the content intellectually. We ought to "feel more," she asserts, and think less. Art does not "contain" or "mean" anything: it simply "is." What matters is being, not meaning.

Sontag is less extreme in "On Style" (1965). She grants that some—but not all—works of art have, for lack of a better word, content. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* as well as in *The Meaning of Meaning,* I.A. Richards says that the difference between science and art is that the one makes referential true-or-false statements about the real world while the other characteristically consists of pseudo-statements, emotive or evocative expressions that merely imitate the appearance of propositions. In contrast, Sontag readily concedes that works of art make statements. She explicitly denies that art is "entirely self-referring." (Whatever else Sontag may be, she is not a deconstructionist. In fact, when she says that works of art "refer to the real world—to our knowledge, to our experience, to our values," she sounds remarkably like Gerald Graff, the deconstructionists' severest critic.) What concerns Sontag, however, is the "distinctive feature" of art—and that, she maintains, is its form, not its content.

What is really problematic about the critical theory that Sontag propounds in "On

1 Yale University Press, 1967.

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Style" is the formalist corollary that the proper appreciation of art requires an attitude of moral indifference. According to Sontag, anyone who presumes to judge a work on the basis of whether its content is acceptable or not is not a critic but a moralist. As evaluative criteria, moral principles are completely inappropriate, she contends, because art is finally "beyond indignation and approval." The allusion, of course, is to Nietzsche, who along with Wilde is the immediate source of the polemic.

This is, to say the least, an untenably naïve view, and Sontag now admits as much. She has no patience with the critic as censor. In spite of what she has written about Cuba and North Vietnam, Sontag is a pluralist, not a totalitarian. But she no longer insists that the critic remain apathetic to the morality, or lack of it, in a work of art. She realizes that a definition of art as form for form's sake is too restrictive, that art has consequences in the real world, and that although art may civilize, it may also barbarize.

In "The *Salmagundi* Interview" (1975), for example, Sontag confesses that in the 1960s she overstated the case for a purely "aesthetic view of the world" and underestimated the nihilistic consequences of such a view. On reflection, she recognizes that an aesthetics of "provocation" and "transvaluation" of the sort that Wilde and Nietzsche practice is subversive of the liberal values that she believes sustain decent human relations. Although Sontag retains a certain contempt for the philistine and the puritan, for the critic who demands that art always serve some utterly serious purpose and who arbitrarily apportions praise or blame, she has developed a new respect for the critic who has a conscience and exercises it. Her study of fascism in particular has convinced Sontag that art has not only a stylistic but also a substantial aspect and, furthermore, that an exclusive emphasis on form can promote a content that is not just voluptuously decadent but, in effect, brutally pernicious.

The crux of change in her point of view centers on her discussion of the films of

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Leni Riefenstahl. In "On Style" Sontag claims that Riefenstahl's films "transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage." In *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* the content (Sontag places quotation marks around the word) plays "a purely formal role," she says. What is objectionable about this assertion is the word "purely." Riefenstahl is an important figure in the history of film precisely (or *only*) because she made a fine "art" of propaganda. (Hitler and Goebbels, of course, did the same, yet no one hails them as artists.) To suggest that *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* defy categorization as propaganda simply because the formal quality of the films happens to exceed ordinary expectations is blatantly to ignore the fact that the content, which is inseparable from the *intent* of these films, is morally offensive. It is to admire the mere form of the swastika and to disregard the criminal purposes it has served historically.

In a rather vertiginous reversal, Sontag now acknowledges that nothing, not even art, is beyond good and evil, or above reproach. In "Fascinating Fascism" (1974) she exposes Riefenstahl for the Nazi, or Nazi sympathizer, she has always been. What is especially reprehensible, Sontag says, is that Riefenstahl describes *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* as documentaries, as *cinema verité,* and not as propaganda. In "Against Interpretation" Sontag argues that realism is only a convention. Now she seems to imply that honest documentary and objective reportage are not only possible but also desirable under certain circumstances—and definitely preferable to propaganda, which deliberately distorts reality in order cynically to manipulate events. If Riefenstahl had represented the Third Reich as it really was, gas chambers and all, and not as the Nazis wished it to seem, Sontag presumably would have no quarrel with her. But Riefenstahl "beautified" the ugly face of Germany—and it takes no Polonius to recognize how ill-intentioned, how vile, that act was. That Riefenstahl did what she did with "style" is no excuse, and certainly no commendation.

Art never exists in splendid isolation from the real world; it often, in fact, exists in sordid relation to it. Sontag now acknowledges that, and she seems to recognize as well the allures of style in life as well as in art. Thus she decries not only fascist art but also any art that encourages people "to regard their very lives as a (life) style." Sontag, of course, bears no little responsibility for the superficiality that tries pathetically to dignify itself as a lifestyle. She actively encouraged an entire generation to confuse life with art, or at least with a one-dimensional definition of art as pure form. The result was the conversion of radical will into what Tom Wolfe called radical chic. It is one thing to appreciate style in art; it is quite another thing to lead a life devoid of content in the name of style. The consequences, as Sontag knows only too well, are still with us: the "New Sensibility" of the 1960s has become the "New Wave" of the 1980s, equally vacuous.

It is hardly necessary to say that Sontag is a critic to be reckoned with. She has always welcomed, indeed invited, contention. She is a forcibly precise prose stylist who has, if she has done nothing else, provoked controversy and encouraged real argument. She has been not merely a presence but an influence—and how many other contemporary critics can claim as much? The most important mind that Sontag has changed may, however, be her own.

Although Sontag is understandably reluctant to retract all the opinions she expressed so energetically in the 1960s, she appears to be in transition toward a more mature and responsible criticism. In "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes" (1981), Sontag bids farewell to the French critic and friend who died in a tragic accident in Paris two years ago. When she says that

> Barthes harbored spiritual stirrings that could not be supported by his aesthete's position. It was inevitable that he pass beyond it, as he did in his very last work and teaching . . .

she seems to be talking as much to herself as about him. It is as if she has finally realized

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that she must pass beyond the limitations of the formalists' or stylists' position that she once defended so fervently—and do something more meaningful.

If complacency is antithetical to any criticism worth the name, then Sontag would seem to be in an enviable, if ambivalent, position. For she knows, at least intuitively, that, to remain relevant, criticism must address the issues of the moment. Among those issues for her now is the pervasion of barbarism, which she defines as the commercialization of style as an ethos. In this respect, Sontag is very pessimistic—unduly so—about the prospects for a criticism that would make any real difference today. Thus she says that "defenders of civilization must be aware—though I don't think it helps to say it often—that this civilization, already so overtaken by barbarism, *is* at an end, and nothing we do will put it back together again." The whole, she declares, is so shattered, and the parts so scattered, that contemporary critics can have no appreciable impact. But surely the situation is hardly as desperate as all that. Ineffectual as criticism may sometimes be, and as widespread as the sense of futility may be, critics, including Sontag, may yet exert a not inconsiderable civilizing influence, if they only will.

Novel of the apes

Bernard Malamud God's Grace. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 223 pages, $13.50

reviewed by Arthur Krystal

For thirty years, since the publication of *The Natural* (1952), Bernard Malamud has communicated the peculiar blend of hope and despair, of grit and helplessness, that typified the reaction of East European Jewish immigrants to the urban, racially mixed, lower-middle-class neighborhoods of America. Only I. B. Singer, when not conjuring dybbuks in a Polish *shtetl*, compares with him in yielding up the bittersweet subsistence of the honest, confused Jew besieged by improbable events and incomprehensible values. Malamud's gift, and it is no small one, has always been his ability to depict the real world in a fabulistic light, so that we question neither the truthfulness of the fable nor the fancifulness of the reality. This is the Malamud of *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973), the parodist who captivates us with stories about a sorely tried Jewish tailor (a contemporary Job, if you will) who comes to believe in a Negro angel on probation, or about a testy young man who agonizes over the purchase of an invisible silver crown that will reputedly cure his father of a terminal illness.

Then again, perhaps too much has been made of Malamud's folksiness, his yarnspinning or, as one wrongheaded commentator called it, his reliance on "a kind of literary primitivism." There is nothing primitive, literary or otherwise, in *The Assistant* (1957) or *A New Life* (1961) or for that matter in many of the short stories, though one might argue that the Yiddishness—by which I mean a world view characterized by humor, piquancy, and moral preoccupation and rendered in unadorned prose—which breathed life into the earlier stories represents the quintessential Malamud. Nonetheless, Malamud's longer fictions are realistic, with a resonance distinctly their own. If they do not have for us the same artless appeal of the fable-like pieces, it is because they are not meant to, and this surely is no cause for complaint. But we may feel disappointment when Malamud's work belabors matters of a flagrantly personal nature (*Dubin's Lives* comes to mind) or when it proselytizes about specific societal ills, for then it achieves a sameness with other novels dealing with writer's block, mid-life crisis, or sexual politics. So if Malamud is at his best when he is describing the Yiddish-American milieu, it is a limitation only in the sense that Faulkner's muse was limited by the South or Cheever's by suburbia.

It is thus sadly ironic that in returning to the fable form Malamud has failed to recapture the rightness of tone that in the past has

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impressed upon us the rightness of the work. With *God's Grace,* Malamud the fabulist has wrapped himself in an eschatological mantle, moved from the world of men to the world of monkeys, and concocted a precious, heavy-handed allegory about the end of mankind and of one man.

The story begins twenty minutes after the "Devastation." The only human survivor is Calvin Cohn, a paleologist studying the ocean floor in a submersible when the missiles began flying. Upon returning to his ship, the *Rebekah Q,* Cohn is informed by God that he has escaped through an oversight. Cohn pleads with Him for his life but receives no assurances. God vanishes, and Cohn finds on board a chimpanzee whom he names Buz. Cohn and Buz eventually wash up on an island where Cohn behaves like Robinson Crusoe while waiting for the divine ax to fall. Upon discovering that Buz had been fitted with an artificial larynx, Cohn engages him in conversation about the nature of God, man, and language. But Buz would rather be told stories. His favorite is the one about Cain and Abel because "thot's where the oction is."

Time passes. A gorilla appears. Cohn dubs him George. More time passes. Five chimpanzees "brachiate" on the camp. They are named Melchior, Luke, Saul, Esau, and Mary Madelyn. These chimps, without benefit of mechanical larynxes, are also capable of speech. How? Because, as Buz explains, "they hov faith." Eventually, three more chimps drop in. Each member of the community has his or her allotted tasks, overseen by Cohn, who holds forth in the afternoons on cosmology, evolution, evil, and the imbroglio over nature versus nurture.

With the island running smoothly, Cohn begins to think about not only his future but mankind's. After much deliberation he decides that the species must survive. Yes, Cohn is going "to monkey with evolution." He impregnates Mary Madelyn, thus begetting a daughter, Rebekah Islanda.

Time passes. Enter eight baboons, creatures abhorrent to the chimpanzees. Led by Esau, the chimps wage war against them,

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killing and eating the infant baboons. In short time, they revert to bestiality, killing Rebekah Islanda and destroying what civilized artifacts Cohn has managed to fashion or has saved from the ship. Finally, with God's aid (mercy?) they sacrifice him on a stone mountain. So Cohn dies painlessly while "[i]n a tall tree in the valley below, George the gorilla, wearing a mud-stained white yarmulke," says Kaddish.

If this summary seems irreverent it is because reading *God's Grace* is not unlike sitting through a bad horror movie in which the frightening effects are cushioned by corny dialogue and the mugging of the actors. This does not necessarily detract from one's enjoyment—it may even be the basis for it—but Malamud wishes to be, and ought to be, taken seriously. After all, what is he writing about if not the end of the world and one man's refusal to relinquish his physical and moral existence? Not the most inviting of comic premises. Yet Malamud cannot resist making jokes—sly jokes, silly jokes, awful jokes. Reflecting on the absence of insects, Cohn comments that "silence bugs me." When planning a seder, Cohn muses that invitations will have to be extended personally since "there [are] no mail deliveries." The archness rarely lets up, though sometimes it is palatable, as in the following conversation between Buz and Cohn:

> "There's plenty of violence and blood in the New Testament. Painters worked in red from that for centuries."
>
> "Thot's because they crucified Jesus of Nozoroth," Buz said.
>
> "Who did?" asked Cohn, on the qui vive.
>
> "The Roman soldiers."
>
> Cohn patted his head.

One has to smile at this, but too many smiles work against the book's interest. Still another distraction is Malamud's habit of strewing the narrative with ostensibly meaningful but unexplained details. Why, for example, had Cohn changed his name from

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PICASSO. *Tête de Femme*, 1946.
Oil on canvas, 28¾ x 23⅝ in. (73 x 60 cm).
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Seymour to Calvin? (Was he thinking of John Calvin? Calvin Klein?) What is the significance of the mysterious albino ape of the forest? Is he, as Cohn wonders, God's messenger? What sort of emphasis should be placed on Buz's final articulation (his pre-Devastation name)? These cryptic offerings only serve to trivialize the more substantial questions the narrative poses: Does language humanize? Are rampant sexuality, prejudice, and aggression irredeemably part of nature? Is it because Cohn overreached or simply because he survived that he comes to see his handiwork and his hopes for a new world destroyed?

Because Cohn, like all of Malamud's heroes, is essentially a decent man, his fate seems undeserved. Goodness apparently is not enough; in fact, good intentions become downright dangerous when they attempt to improve upon nature. The fact that Cohn's heart is in the right place (never mind his phallus) carries little weight with God. And where is God's grace in all this? When all is said and done, He has merely allowed Cohn to die an old man.

There are problems with this God, perhaps because Malamud himself does not know how to present Him. ""Don't presume on Me a visible face, Mr. Cohn, I am not that kind, but if you can, imagine Me."" All too easily, I'm afraid. This God is, at most, an omnipotent incompetent, who has conceived a cosmos apparently beyond His control and who admits to not having foreseen the extent of man's vileness. Notice the double quotation marks. Presumably this is meant to tell us that Malamud does not speak for God, but at the same time the punctuation implies that this is indeed God whom he is quoting, the oracular voice that speaks of creation and cause and effect. Yet this is also a God who can complain about man's treatment of His ozone layer and who is not above bandying words with Cohn. You can't have it both ways. Either this is the absolute God of the Old Testament, of Book XI of *Paradise Lost,* of the "Prologue in Heaven" in *Faust,* or a put-on.

Stanley Elkin, in *The Living End,* does not make the mistake of confusing the two representations of the Deity. Elkin's God (whose words are circumscribed by one set of inverted commas) appears to the damned in the guise of a clean-shaven, tastefully appointed, small-town professional man: "Hi," God said, "I'm the Lord . . . . I'm Himself Himself and I don't even know how I do it . . . . Omniscience gives Me eyestrain. I'll let you in on something. I wear contacts. Oh yes, I grind the lenses Myself. They're very strong. Well, you can imagine."

Malamud, however, wants to have the "true" God and have fun with Him too. This sort of calculated indulgence is, in fact, characteristic of the book as a whole and is its major failing. The unfortunate blend of serious intent and comic execution leaves the reader uncertain of what to make of it all. I do not mean by this that it is difficult to grasp the moral (fables are obvious, if nothing else), but it is the intensity of the moral vision that is open to question. Human nature, whether exhibited by men or apes, is a nasty piece of work, and punishment is inevitable. Very well, but why couch this bitter sentiment in terms of a coy, simplistic account of destruction and thwarted genesis? The conceit does not jibe with the manner of its development; like Cohn's assessment of God's "imperfect creation" (man), *God's Grace* is "subtly conceived but less well executed. Body and soul h[a]ng badly together."

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Notebook

Glenn Gould

by Samuel Lipman

Glenn Gould is dead. He was the most individual performing musician of his generation, and his passing at the age of fifty removes the one pianist from the musical scene who seemed to have the ability to say something new and interesting about familiar—and over-familiar—music.

When he gave concerts—which he did widely until 1964—they were wildly successful with audiences and often even with music critics. For almost twenty years thereafter, until his death in Toronto last month, he confined himself to recorded performances. The records he made sold steadily, in quantities far surpassing those of his colleagues.

Gould's recording career began in 1955 with the monumental *Goldberg Variations* of Bach; it ended (at least as far as releases during his lifetime were concerned) with the same work, recorded in 1981 and made available to the public in September to coincide with the pianist's fiftieth birthday. The first recording created nothing short of a sensation; the second has received critical approval no less favorable, though understandably less surprised. What had seemed serious in the new performance when heard before Gould's death now seems premonitory. The news that he had planned to give up the piano after he turned fifty—because he felt he had nothing further to say—can only intensify the impression of heaviness and doom that Gould's last re-thinking of the work makes.

In between these two Bach recordings Gould made tens of discs, delving heavily not only into Bach but also into Mozart and Beethoven. At his hands the solo pieces of Brahms were a rare combination of charm and seriousness. He recorded piano works of Schoenberg and of Hindemith, and even music as far away from his affinity for Bach as Scriabin and Prokofiev. He did a brilliant performance of such a virtuoso task as the Liszt transcription of the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven; he made his own striking version of the *Meistersinger* Prelude and recorded it. He was a composer, too, and his String Quartet, recorded many years ago but now out of print, remains an enormously talented reworking of early Schoenberg, deeply moving, for all its derivativeness, and never less than brilliantly accomplished as a composition.

Though his playing of Bach was widely admired—at least by those who admit the possibility of performing such music on the piano—and though his recordings of late romantic and contemporary music were appreciated, his conceptions of Mozart and Beethoven hardly fared so well. His way of doing these universally admired works seemed to be a throwing of so many red flags in the faces of our musical arbiters. Slow where custom decreed fast, fast where it decreed slow, staccato where everyone played legato, such music so played seemed to many unrecognizable.

But so strong was Gould's musical spark that what began as shock for his listeners

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ended, at least for many, in acceptance. Part of his ability to convince undoubtedly lay in his own manifest conviction about the supreme value of what he was doing. This aura of conviction was strongly reinforced, as is so often the case in major performing-arts careers, by the personal idiosyncrasies he so prominently flaunted. All of his many quirks were exploited by his commercial agents and seized upon by the press.

But to stop here and identify Gould the musician with Gould the neurotic would be to miss what made him a great artist. He possessed an unparalleled ability to shape the musical line and to articulate complex contrapuntal patterns at the same time; all that he did was always at the service of what can only be called his fancy. How he was able to accomplish all this, music teachers will puzzle over for decades to come. There is little doubt that they will fail to unlock the puzzle.

Now that he is dead, the predictable tributes—this one among them—are rolling in. He received the accolade of a front page obituary, continued on a full inside page, in *The New York Times*. The *Times* properly stressed Gould's accomplishments, including his making of radio documentaries. Unfortunately missing, here at least, was an account of the famous performances by Gould of the Brahms D minor Concerto with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in 1962. Here, in Carnegie Hall, Gould made his most courageous attack on received opinion; it was the last great moment in his public performing career.

He had the temerity to play the first movement of the concerto slowly, in accord with Brahms's own tempo designation of *Maestoso,* rather than the customary *Allegro.* Bernstein was so aghast at this iconoclasm that he spoke to the audience just before Gould came on stage, abjuring all responsibility for the enormity that was to come. No one felt this enormity more than Harold Schonberg, then music critic of the *Times.*

Schonberg wrote his review in dialect, in the form of an imaginary conversation with an old colleague. He accused Gould of having invented non-existent inner voices, of playing the concerto at slower than practice tempo because, in Schonberg's words, "maybe his technique is not so good." And he called him "the Gould boy." Heard today, on a broadcast tape, Gould's conception seems viable, thought out, magisterial—and his own.

For music lovers everywhere, his death will be a loss. For Canada as a nation the loss will be especially keen. Gould was by far the most important musician Canada has ever produced, and perhaps its most important artistic figure of any kind whatever. These are difficult days for Canada, racked by structural economic woes, sluggish foreign markets, insecure nationalism, breakaway provinces, and the extremes of bilingualism. Partly as a response to internal problems and partly out of the usual governmental attempt to force feed cultural growth, Canada recently embarked on a lavish and ultimately disappointing program of supporting the arts. There will now be an understandable tendency to react to Gould's death by hatching the usual halls and scholarships and archives in the name of the departed.

But all these projects will inevitably have the effect of replacing one great artist with many little ones. What Gould did with his art is not replicable; he was an original, and those who will follow him must be original as well. They will not become so by being told to worship at a shrine, nor will they become so by being urged to see in Glenn Gould an example of a specifically Canadian art. The influences on Gould were international; they were the great composers. That he responded to them so strongly seems to have been because Canada provided him with the freedom to react in his own way to the material he chose for himself. This is the way, if not to make artists, to allow artists to make themselves. This Gould richly did, and one can only hope that those responsible for Canadian cultural life will continue to allow his successors to do as much.

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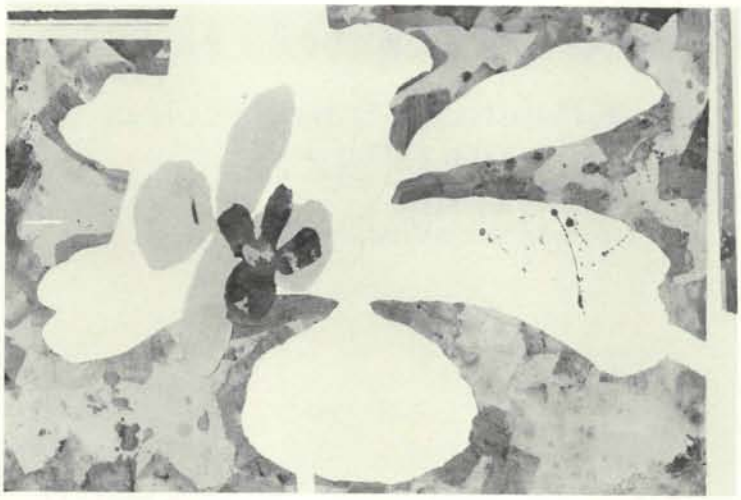

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